



SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

NBA PREVIEW

JAMES HARDEN:
"WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU'VE
SEEN ANYTHING NORMAL FROM ME?"
BY PABLO S. TORRE


KEVIN DURANT'S LAST STAND
BY RAMONA SHELBURNE

**WHO WILL WIN THE
TITLE IN 2016?**

CAVS **LEBRON JAMES**
THE SECRET POWER PLAYS OF



EXPRESS + STEPHEN CURRY

A man and a woman stand on a rocky shore at night, looking up at a vibrant green aurora borealis in the sky. The aurora is a large, flowing curtain of light. In the background, a calm lake reflects the lights, and snow-capped mountains are visible under a starry sky.

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**Let's
Go
Places**



A man with short dark hair, wearing a blue button-down shirt, is driving a vehicle through a desert landscape. He is looking out the window to his right. The vehicle is a light-colored SUV or truck, and a red kayak is mounted on the back. The background is a hazy, sunlit desert with rolling hills.

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CHRIS BURKARD
ADVENTURE PHOTOGRAPHER

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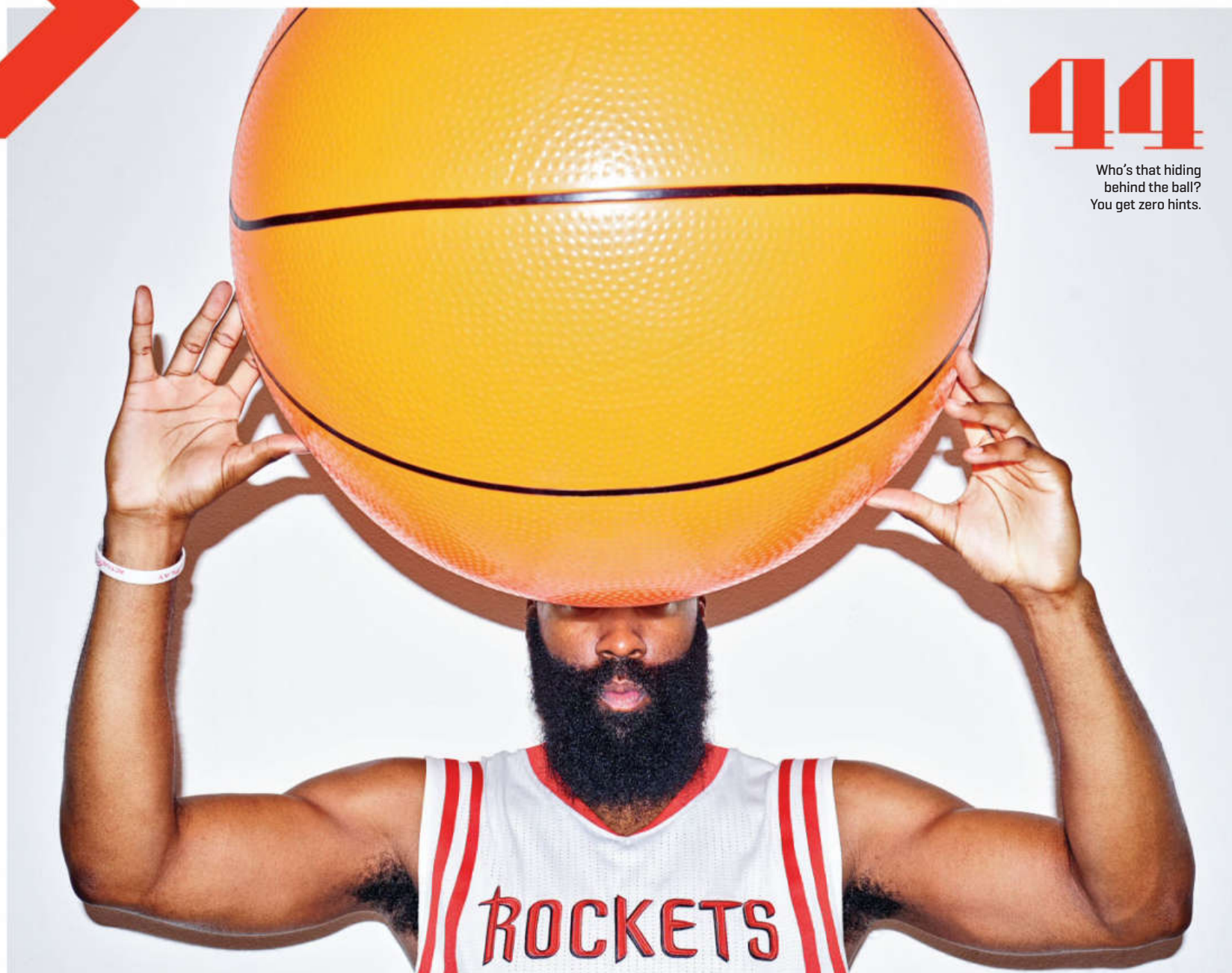
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MODERN AHEAD OF ITS TIME

10.26.15

ESPN

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Who's that hiding
behind the ball?
You get zero hints.



NBA PREVIEW

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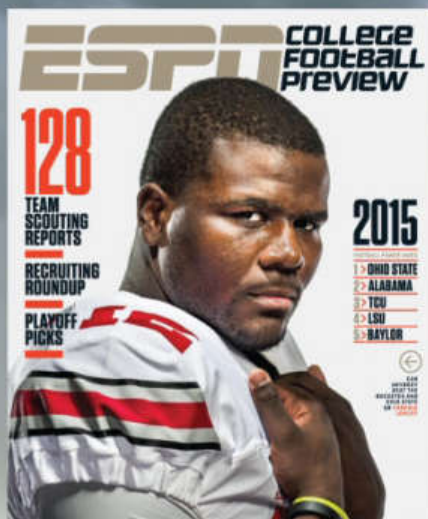
92 THE TRUTH

Bud Norris' words on respecting the game sent a bad message. BY HOWARD BRYANT

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Sky-rocketing

Photographer Bella Howard on shooting James Harden: "I have to be honest, as a Brit I don't follow basketball. I had to Google 'James Harden,' and he seemed right up my street: full of personality and dates a Kardashian. We turned up to Harden's mega mansion in Calabasas, California, and I wondered with the traffic why anyone would want to live this far out of LA. But when we went out to his backyard, I saw one of the most spectacular views I have ever seen. Mountains upon mountains—it was heaven. We set up the first shot in his garage, and he decided it would be cool to take pics of him on his hoverboard while we all chucked mini basketballs at him. Harden was a pleasure to shoot. Now I can't wait to go see my first game." MORE ON PAGE 44

Harden enjoys a little crowning around.

Senior writer Pablo S. Torre on Harden's rise to prominence



"My first sit-down with James Harden was in 2012, right after he was traded to the Rockets. This past August, when I saw him in Houston, the first thing I told him was how I'd been seeing him everywhere. "That's a good thing," Harden replied. It was a throwaway line in an elevator but also the entire point. This summer, Harden's surging fame—from his players' union MVP, to his \$200 million Adidas contract, to his romance with Khloe Kardashian—has become undeniable. Harden's celebrity, like his on-court success, is far from accidental in its efficiency." MORE ON PAGE 44

Senior writer Ramona Shelburne on Kevin Durant's OKC



"I spent a week in Oklahoma City, and every night around 7 found myself going outside to look at the sunset. One night I went to Briarwood Elementary in Moore, Oklahoma, where the tornadoes ripped through a few years ago. I met some kids playing basketball on the court Kevin Durant and the Thunder rebuilt for them. We chatted awhile about the twister, their city and the team, and I asked how they'd feel if Durant or Westbrook left. One kid said, "If Kevin left, I'd be really hurt. Russ is different." That's when I fully understood what Kevin Durant means to this city." MORE ON PAGE 62

Grantland writer Kirk Goldsberry on his maps of NBA offenses



"I teach students to show data by blending computer science with age-old cartography. [Goldsberry is a visiting scholar at the Harvard Center for Geographic Analysis.] I have this relentless ambition to prove that mapmaking has a place in sports analysis. Why aren't we taking advantage of 21st-century ideas in a way that's more efficient and objective than a lot of the discourse out there? The structure of who has the ball and where they have it determines each second of each game. Invisible spatial structures are at the core of why a player is better or worse. That's a fact." MORE ON PAGE 68

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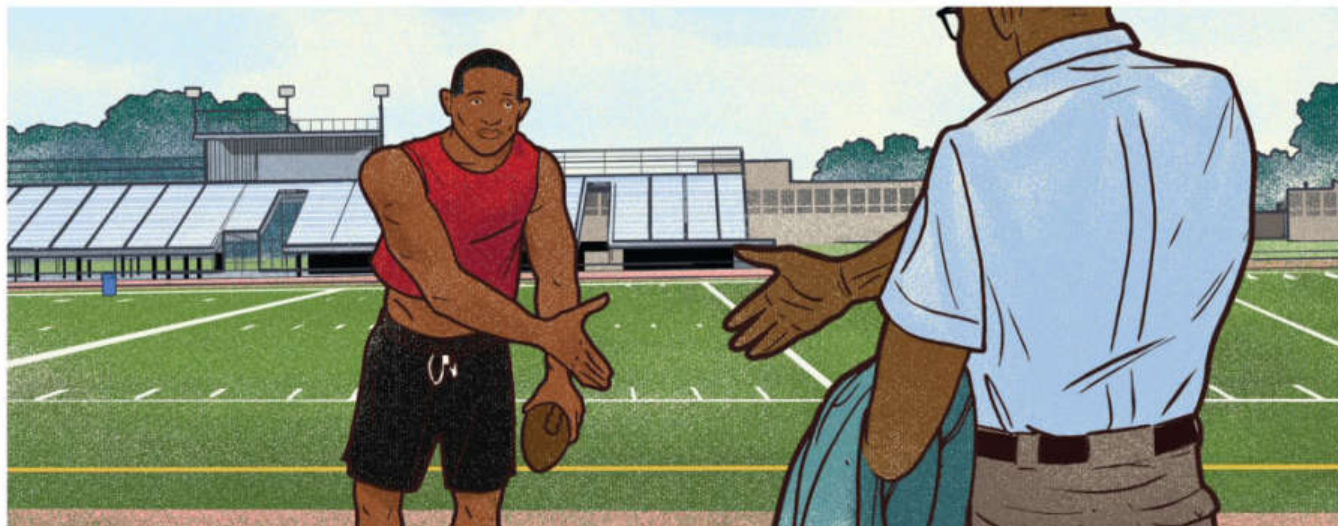
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BY
RAY
LEWIS



Say My Name He found fame in Baltimore, controversy in Atlanta and a new career with ESPN. In his autobiography, Ray Lewis shares his story, starting with the stranger who gave him his name.



My twin sisters had my mother's name—anyway, they had the name Jenkins, which was the name of my blood grandfather on my mother's side. My mother went by McKinney, which was the name of her stepfather, Gillis McKinney, a man I grew up knowing as my maternal grandfather. My baby sister had another name—my brother, too. We were a mismatched set, and I wanted to know who was who, what was what, who had the same name as *me*.

One day, my mom took the time to explain it all to me—*some* of it, at least, and here it helps to know that we never talked about my father. He wasn't a part of our lives, wasn't even a part of our thinking, but there was no way to have *this* conversation without bringing him up. Come to think of it, this was the first conversation I can remember where we talked about him at all. My mother said, "Baby Ray, I will never say one bad thing about your father. Ever. Never. He's your daddy, after all."

I said, "Okay, but whose name do I have? We don't know no Lewises."

She said, "I'm 'bout to tell you, if you let me finish."

I didn't know much, but I knew to stay out of my mother's way when she got going on a story.

She continued, plain talk: "Your father, he's chosen not to be in your life, so you're gonna have to figure that out. There is no one to teach you how to be a man. I can't teach you to be a man. That one's on you. But when it comes to your name, that's a whole other story."

That whole other story went like this: My mother was a good-looking young woman, stunning—hazel eyes, hair down to her freakin' butt, a smile to light up the night sky—just crazy beautiful. I look at pictures from when she was thirteen, fourteen years old,

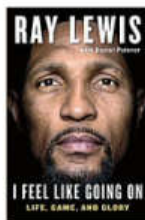
and I'm knocked out. My father was, too. That's why he'd come around in the first place. He was just a couple years older, but he used to babysit my mom when she was little; he knew our family; he took notice as she grew up—kept comin' round, long past the time she needed minding. Let me tell you, it was hard *not* to notice my mother. Those pictures don't lie. She turned heads. Folks around town, they knew who she was just by the way she looked. Folks the next town over, they knew who she was, too. The boys, they lined up just to talk to her, to be near to her. So when she finally got around to telling my father about me on the day I was born, the day he turned tail, there was this other young man next in line, and he stepped up and helped my mother with her hospital bills. Wasn't like he was fixing to hang around, wasn't like there was any kind of relationship between them, but the young man had taken a shine to my mother, said it was his privilege to help in this small way. And it was. To him, it was a small kindness; to my mother, it was big beyond big. He was a military man, and here he'd done my mother this great good turn, so she reached out to him a second time. She asked him to sign the hospital paperwork, where it asks for the name of the baby's father—and happily, mercifully, he agreed.

That young man's name was Ray Lewis, so my name became Ray Lewis. Just like that. My mother hardly knew this man, but it was a way to honor him.

I was a way to honor him.

I didn't meet him until many years later, when my own name was becoming well known. I'd been having some success on the football field and on the wrestling mat in high school. And this man, Ray Lewis, found a way to reach out to me, tell me who he was. He'd had no contact with my mother since he'd helped her out just after I was born, but he introduced himself—said, "My name is Ray Lewis, son. I used to know your mama."

I made the connection right away. "Thank you for giving me your name, sir. I will make it great."



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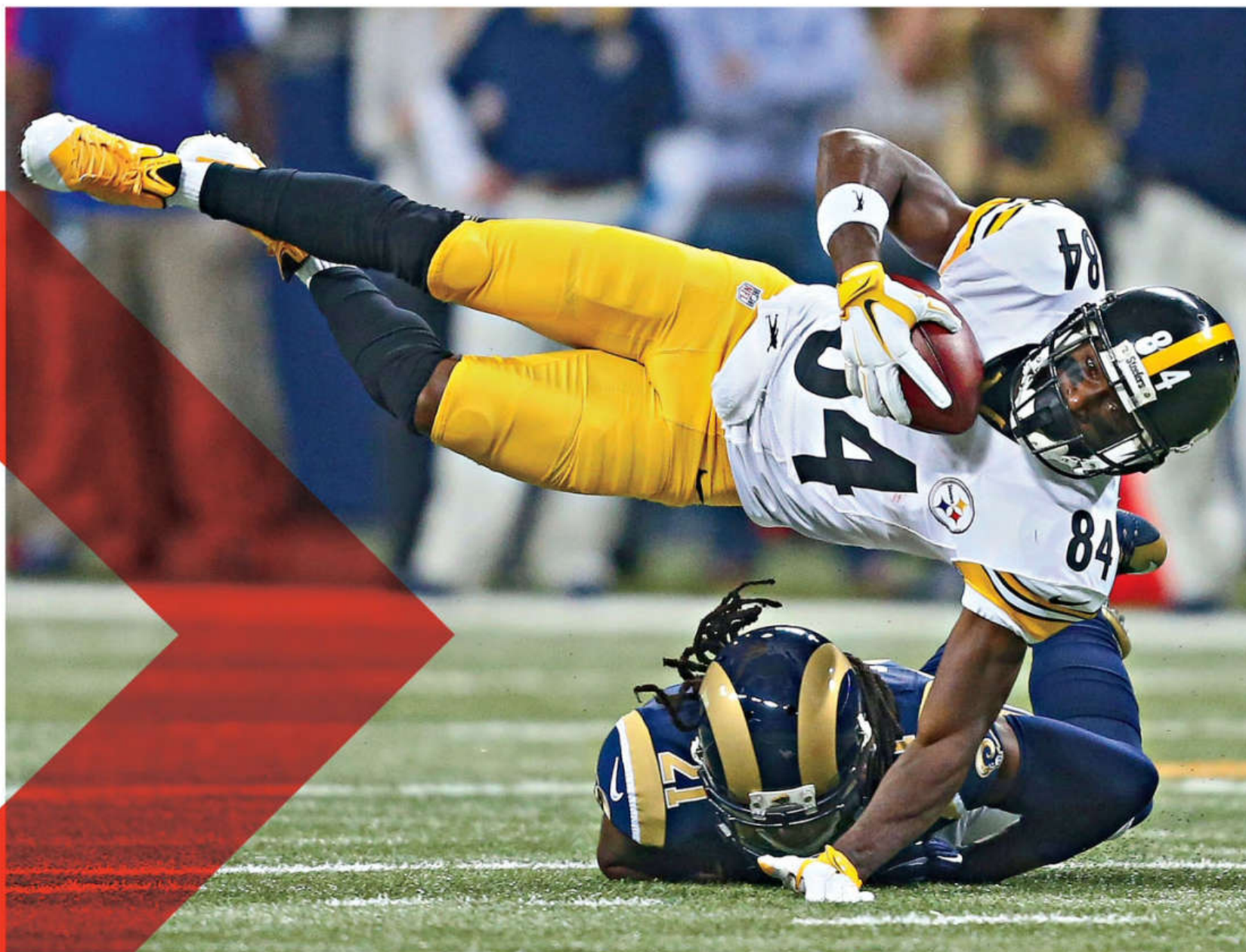
FORWARD



'My Swag Is Too Up'

Antonio Brown talks Big Ben, Michael Vick and why his game is as unstoppable as his hair.

INTERVIEW BY JEREMY FOWLER



What do you listen to in those gold headphones pregame?

I usually have some mood music. I get my mind right to relax my breathing. Before the Patriots on opening night, I had Ace Hood's "I Know How It Feel" and that "blame it on the night" song by Calvin Harris. I had some Mistah F.A.B. Different music that gets me going.

What's up with the hairstyles? How much work or care do you put into your image?

I just like to bring energy. I always try to create a moment. Memories are important to me, and I like my look to go with the mood or the moment. My girlfriend actually did my hair the first time I made it like a mohawk. The Nino Brown-inspired haircut has been rolling for a few years.

How do you digest a game you just played?

The day after, I'll usually come in and run, watch tape, try to mentally dissect situations. How could I have been better on plays I didn't make?

Brown reels in one of his 11 receptions in the Steelers' 12-6 Week 3 win against the Rams.

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What could I have done better in the red zone?

What's one thing about your relationship with Ben Roethlisberger that most don't know?

We have a great relationship. We've been building it for six years, and every year he's gained more trust in me. Mentally, we have that connection where he knows where I'm going to be. And I have a great situational awareness of where he's going to place the ball. Usually we talk about what he likes and what I'm seeing. How are they covering me? Are they dedicating two guys to me? How did I look in certain situations or a different coverage he may not have looked for me on? He'll ask me, "OK, what can we get on them?" Off the field, he's always pushing the marriage card on me, wondering when my date is coming. We have a great relationship. He makes jokes about my kids. My girlfriend and his wife are pretty cool. On marriage, I tell him, "Not too fast, I've got to grow into it."

With Roethlisberger hurt, can you create similar on-field chemistry with Michael Vick on the fly?

I don't think you can re-create that. I don't think you can. That's been a work in progress for a lot of years. What we can do is get better, grow, try to be the best we can be. Other guys have to step up and take it as a challenge.

What do you think Vick brings to the offense?

He's got a lot of skill sets. He wings it. My job is to catch the ball no matter how they throw it—hard, soft, medium. You've got to be able to catch it.

You've said you're the best receiver in the game.

Why do you feel you can make that claim?

The fundamentals, the details, the mental preparation that goes into my game, knowing I'm coming into the stadium and they are dedicating two guys to stop me. I think I just work the hardest. I'm really disciplined. I take care of myself. I'm well-organized. I do the little things right—getting separation, getting in the right position.

At 5-10 in a league filled with monster receivers over 6 feet, how do you overcome your size?

If you're not a first-round pick or you're not 6-2, they always say you can't be the best. But the only time there's a weight class is before the draft. This is the NFL. It's all about what you do. I can run past guys and get done what I need to. I can do everything the big guy can do. You don't see a 6-5 Ferrari. It's low to the ground.

Has the state of the receiver position changed?

It's changed dramatically. Back in the day, it was always the bigger guys—Randy Moss, Cris Carter, Larry Fitzgerald. It was a game of bigger guys. The game has transformed with different routes,



STEAL CITY

A 2010 sixth-round pick, Antonio Brown has been the NFL's most prolific receiver since the beginning of 2013.

MOST RECEPTIONS SINCE 2013

273

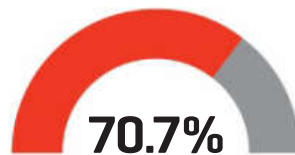
ANTONIO BROWN

236 DEMARIYUS THOMAS	227 JULIAN EDELMAN	205 PIERRE GARCON	201 ANDRE JOHNSON
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MOST RECEIVING YARDS SINCE 2013

ANTONIO BROWN	3,675
DEMARIYUS THOMAS	3,410
A.J. GREEN	2,884
JORDY NELSON	2,833
CALVIN JOHNSON	2,824

HIGHEST RECEPTION RATE WHEN TARGETED SINCE 2013*



70.7% JULIAN EDELMAN	65.9% PIERRE GARCON	62.9% DEMARIYUS THOMAS	61.8% BRANDON MARSHALL
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*At least 300 targets
All stats through Week 4.

different coverages. Jerry Rice was playing against man coverage, that's all he got. Now defenses are blitzing and dedicating two corners to the best guy.

Why do the bigger guys still get the benefit of the doubt in the debate over who's the best receiver?

I think it's just cooler for fans to watch a bigger guy. If a guy comes into the stadium 6-2, it's, "Oh yeah, this guy is amazing." When you look up NFL history, the bigger guys have had success. There's kind of never been a guy of my size who's able to do what I'm doing—maybe Marvin Harrison. But I don't really care. I think I'm judged by my performance and how the Steelers do.

Best corner you've ever faced?

All of them. Every guy is the best. So it's my job to expose things they need to get better at.

How do you present yourself off the field?

I want to be known as a guy who, regardless of circumstance, always gave 100 percent, always went the hardest and the smartest. Pray up, inspiration to God, put in what I get out. I've got Nike commercials, fantasy NFL commercials, I'm in the show *Ballers*. I'm in a *Sunday Night Football* commercial—a touchdown celebration with Carrie Underwood. I was in LA for the ESPYS, nominated for the best player in the league.

What's your weakness as a receiver?

I don't think I have any weaknesses. I just think I look too good. My swagger is too up. I just think I'm a movie star [laughs]. My style is on fleek. I'm joking around, but I'm having a lot of fun.

What was hardest about getting here from being a sixth-round pick?

You come in the league, you think everyone will get a fair opportunity. The hardest part was waiting my turn, being patient. It's why I stay hungry. Some guys can't endure knowing they are a good player but can't get in the game, so you have to have the mental capacity. I think I was real humble. I knew what I was going through. I knew God would allow my opportunity to come, and I knew I needed to excel. They were always trying to make me a special-teamer, but I eventually caught 100 passes. However I could get on the field was good, but I knew I wanted more.

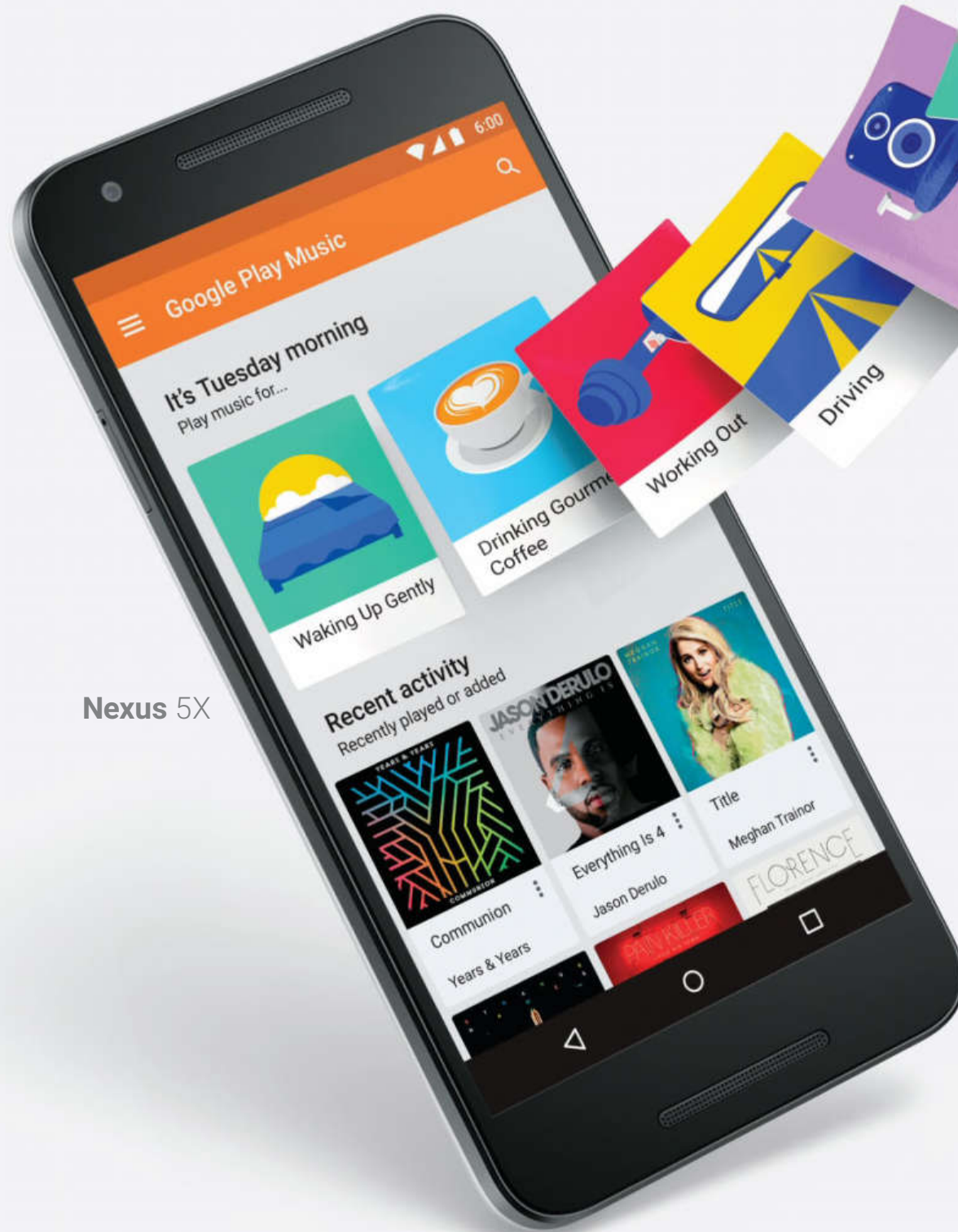
What keeps you on top?

It starts in the offseason. We got after it. I trained with Randy Moss this offseason. But I usually keep around a group of hungry guys who haven't made it and have a thirst to make a team. You have to continue to prove that you can still do it and still look good. How do you eat? How do you stretch? How do you train? I really enjoy training with college guys who are on break, anybody who possesses the hunger to be better. ■



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How They Do in Oxford

Seven weeks in Mississippi in search of the allure of football, the stains of the Confederacy and the meaning of honorable change.

BY KIESE LAYMON

DT Robert Nkemdiche scores a TD in Ole Miss' 76-3 win over UT Martin.

THE LONG REACH OF HISTORY

1848 THE BEGINNING

The University of Mississippi is founded. The incoming class consists of 80 young men.

1861 THE CIVIL WAR

Most students and faculty join the Confederacy. The Rebels nickname is rooted in this era.

1962 INTEGRATION

Flanked by the National Guard for his safety, James Meredith integrates Ole Miss.

“Born and raised
where them Rebel flags
hang from them slaves”
—BIG K.R.I.T.

The sun is searing in Oxford, Mississippi. It's 11:05 a.m. on the first Saturday of September. I'm standing for the national anthem in Vaught-Hemingway Stadium. Though I left this state 20 years ago, after being kicked out of college, Mississippi is still home. • Today is officially White-Out Day at the University of Mississippi. I didn't know that. I'm wearing camouflage shorts, a black Run DMC T-shirt, a faded red sweatshirt, black Adidas with fluorescent fat laces and a Montgomery Biscuits hat cocked to the left.

Tens of thousands of young white folk are wearing white Polos, those Vineyard Vines club shorts, some brown cowboy boots and more long, flowing white dresses than I've ever seen in my life.

I'm wondering who, and what, pays the price for ritualized Southern comfort and uniformity. I can't take my eyes off the backs of the student-athletes who play for the football program at Mississippi. Their uniforms are a bright bloodred. Twenty of the 22 starters look black like me.

I'm also remembering the first real whupping I got in Mississippi for wearing the wrong uniform.

I was 9 years old. I needed an undershirt and a jersey for football practice. Mama was busy teaching at Jackson State, so she asked one of her grad students to take me shopping after school.

There were racks of blue and white Jackson State Tigers jerseys. All the other boys on my team wore those. Behind them were these discounted practice jerseys with the words “Ole Miss” and “SEC” in white cursive above the numbers.

I had no idea where “Ole Miss” was, what “SEC” meant or that Mississippi was the last SEC football team to integrate, in 1972. As a black boy from Jackson who lived and loved the game in the mid-'80s, college football began and ended for me with the historically black universities in the SWAC.

Regardless of whether you lived in North or

West Jackson, or whether your parents or grandparents were alums or employees of Jackson State, everyone used “we” to talk about the Tigers. And most of us had second-favorite teams of Alcorn, Southern, Mississippi Valley State and Grambling.

We didn't know the names of the white schools in our state, or the names of any players who played for or against those teams other than Herschel Walker. Honestly, we didn't even know that some of those white schools had histories of refusing to recruit black student-athletes or play colleges and universities that did. We assumed so many legendary NFL players came from the SWAC because it had the greatest football tradition in our region. We knew that Jackie Slater, one of the most dominant offensive linemen in history, and Walter Payton, the best running back ever, played for Jackson State. We knew that Deacon Jones, one of the NFL's great defensive ends, and Jerry Rice, the most dominant college player in the country at the time, played for Mississippi Valley State. And everyone knew the Prancing J-Settes and the Sonic Boom of the South—Jackson State's trill dancers and thunderous band—put on the greatest halftime show on earth. If you didn't know any—or all—of that, we didn't really care to know you.

Mama had never let me pick out my own clothes before. On the left corner of the red Ole Miss jersey was the same symbol I'd seen on the

top of the General Lee when Grandmama and I watched *The Dukes of Hazzard* on Friday nights. Next to the jerseys was a clearance rack of white T-shirts; on the front center of each stood what looked like an old, strange white pimp.

I'd never seen this pimp before. His long, white mustache dangled over his sunken cheeks. He wore a red suit, a huge red pimp hat. His right hand was behind his back. His left leg was slung jauntily over his right leg. His left hand held a red cane. The white pimp leaned on his cane, and he looked like a less husky version of Boss Hogg.

After practice, when Mama came to pick me up, she saw me in my new Ole Miss jersey. She walked onto the field, pinched the fat under my shoulder pads and told me to get my ass in our Nova. Mama kept asking me questions about my uniform, but I couldn't understand why she was so mad.

Most of my childhood, Mama talked to me like an adult while disciplining me like a child, but this Ole Miss whupping and the accompanying staccato lesson were made for grown folk.

Mama explained to me how integral that Confederate flag on the jersey was to lynching, racial terror and multigenerational black poverty in Mississippi. She talked about how her mother, my grandmama, worked 15 hours a day sometimes for nothing but cornmeal under the watch of white families who flew the Confederate flag.

After the whupping, and the lesson, Mama laughed when I told her that Colonel Reb looked like an old white pimp. “Pimps will never get love or attention in this house, Kie,” she told me.

I asked Mama why any black person would go to a school that glorified the Confederate flag.

“It's bigger than the Confederate flag,” I remember Mama saying before we went to bed. “That flag just adds insult to injury.”

I made the decision that night, as a third-grader, to never stand for the Pledge of Allegiance in any classroom that had the Mississippi state flag, the Confederate flag or any other flag that devalued the black lives and black labor of my Mississippi family, and our people.

I kept that promise until today at my first University of Mississippi football game. After four strange weeks of living in Oxford, I'm wondering how many more promises I'm going to break.

WEEK 1

I first visited Oxford two years ago while on a book tour. Grandmama and Mama made me promise to leave town before the streetlights came on. When the creative writing program at the University of Mississippi selected me as this

1983 SAME SONG

Hundreds of white students rally and sing "Dixie" in support of the Confederate flag.

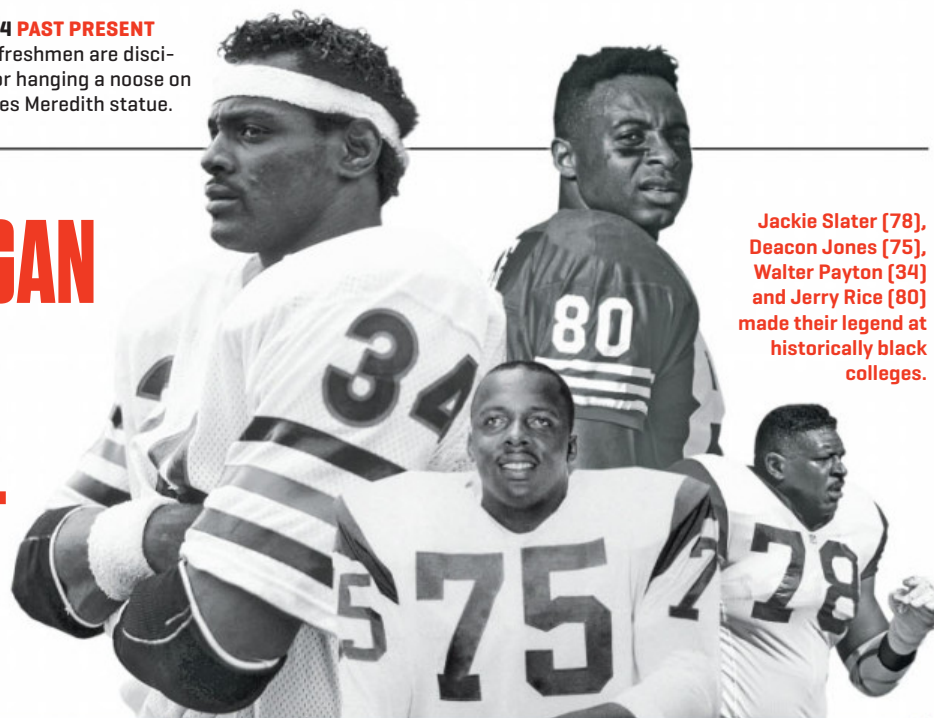
2010 THIS WAY FORWARD

Ole Miss retires Colonel Reb 13 years after banning the rebel flag from its stadium.

2014 PAST PRESENT

Three freshmen are disciplined for hanging a noose on a James Meredith statue.

"COLLEGE FOOTBALL BEGAN AND ENDED WITH THE SWAC. IF YOU DIDN'T KNOW THAT, WE DIDN'T CARE TO KNOW YOU."



Jackie Slater [78], Deacon Jones [75], Walter Payton [34] and Jerry Rice [80] made their legend at historically black colleges.

year's John and Renee Grisham Writer-in-Residence, my family expected the worst. I did too.

Right now, I'm eating the best squash casserole I've eaten in my life at a restaurant called Ajax Diner. Ajax is on the Courthouse Square, the economic and cultural center in Oxford. There are lots of white folk in the restaurant, and a number of illustrations of Ray Charles and other black bluesmen on the wall. Twice I've heard, "We good, but we got to get a running game."

I keep hearing the names Nkemdiche and Laremy and Laquon and Fadol.

I'm a long way from Jackson, but the taste, the smell and the rhythm of the names uttered in Ajax remind me of home. I have lived, taught and written at a college in upstate New York for the past 14 years. In those 14 years, I've never heard a white man say, "Collards pretty good tonight, ain't they?"

That's exactly what the white man at the table next to me keeps saying. I love that his color commentary is absent any linking verbs. I feel prideful that these Oxford white folk are eating our food and talking like us, even if they don't know it.

A few black folk who work in the kitchen come out before I leave. We nod. I don't feel as good about them eating our food anymore.

On my way back to my car, I see my first two Confederate flags in Oxford. One is flowing in the bed of a pickup truck stopped near the courthouse. The other is rigged to the top of a silver Prius with a two-by-four and layers of duct tape. The Prius

has a bumper sticker that says HOTTY TODDY.

I look back at more white folks walking into Ajax. I look around the Square. I'm amazed, not by the swarms of white folk milling around but by how, in a county that's one-quarter black, there can be so few black folk downtown and so many of us at Wal-Mart. More than that, I'm wondering what it means for me to claim ownership over black culture in Mississippi after having been away the same amount of time I lived there. The moral authority to critique Mississippi generally, and Oxford specifically, definitely belongs to someone. I'm not at all sure that someone is me.

Half a mile from home, I ask Google, "What in the world is a Hotty Toddy?"

WEEK 2

I wake up and read a letter published in *The Clarion-Ledger* from John Grisham, some workers from the university and others protesting the Confederacy emblem on the state flag. They conclude: "It's simply not fair, or honorable, to ask black Mississippians to attend schools, compete in athletic events, work in the public sector, serve in the National Guard and go about their normal lives with a state flag that glorifies a war fought to keep their own ancestors enslaved. It's time for Mississippi to fly a flag for all its people."

I reach out to Skipp Coon, one of my favorite artists and a native of Jackson, to see what he thinks of the recent conversation around the state flag, a conversation that has been reignited by the

murders of nine black folks in a Charleston AME church because they were black.

"They can change all the flags they want," Coon tells me. "It's a false solution. It's also what black people have always gotten. We asked for equality; we got integration. We asked for freedom; we got Reconstruction. They can change that flag and my material reality won't improve one bit."

I'm thinking about Skipp's use of the word "solution" and the letter's use of "fair" and "honorable." If changing the flag is a fair and honorable solution, I'm wondering what the writers of the letter assume the problem is.

Noel Didla, an English professor at Jackson State, introduced me to Skipp three years ago. In Jackson—and particularly at Jackson State—Noel, Skipp and a host of other cultural workers are demanding new kinds of structural change. I ask Didla whether she agrees with Skipp.

"I believe symbols have lasting power to immortalize human stories," she answers. "But justice, equity, structural change and truth should be the values on which undoing racism is founded. If not, the victory of bringing down the flag will remain an empty gesture rooted in white supremacy, coupled with white savior complexes. A principled and sustainable paradigm shift and nothing less is what we deserve."

I'm going to bed tonight in Oxford, Mississippi, wandering through the words of Skipp Coon, Noel Didla and John Grisham. A principled and sustained paradigm shift that justly impacts the

FORWARD

lives of black Mississippians would be fair and honorable. But what do I say to people convinced that in spite of 40 percent of black Mississippians living at or below the poverty line, a shameful approach to public education in Mississippi and Mississippi being home to 246,000 children living in poverty as of 2013, my presence in Oxford as the Grisham Writer-in-Residence is proof that a principled and sustained paradigm shift has occurred already?

I'm wondering whether accepting the fellowship at the University of Mississippi was the fair and honorable thing to do.

WEEK 3

I'm on an elliptical machine at a gym in Oxford. I see a white man get out of a beige pickup truck and walk toward a Chinese restaurant. His gun is holstered on his left side.

Damn. This is how they do in Oxford?

While I'm looking at the armed man, a sweaty white guy walks up behind me. He sees me watching ESPN and asks who I think will start at quarterback this year, a player he calls "Machine Gun Kelly from Buffalo," another dude named Ryan Buchanan or "the little black guy, DeVante. DeVante Kincade."

I decide right there that I'm naming both the protagonist and the antagonist of my next novel DeVante Kincade.

When I get home, I reach out to my editor to make sure she sends me some tickets for the game Saturday. She says that she's hooking me up with a photographer from Atlanta named Daymon Gardner, who turns out to be a kind and curious white dude from Baton Rouge, and that we have tickets on the 50-yard line, two rows from the field.

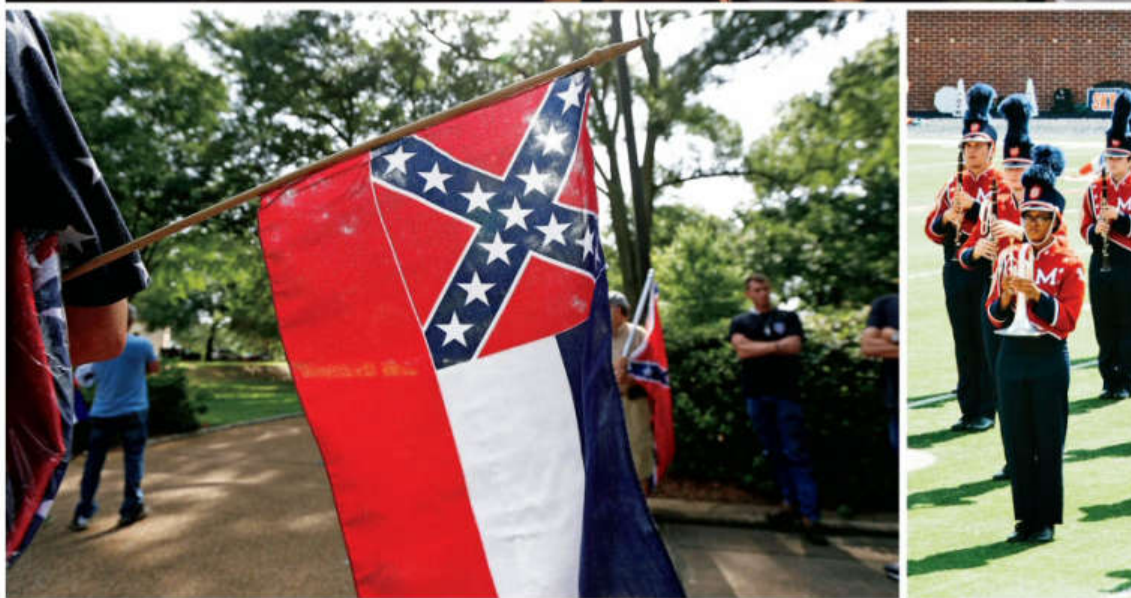
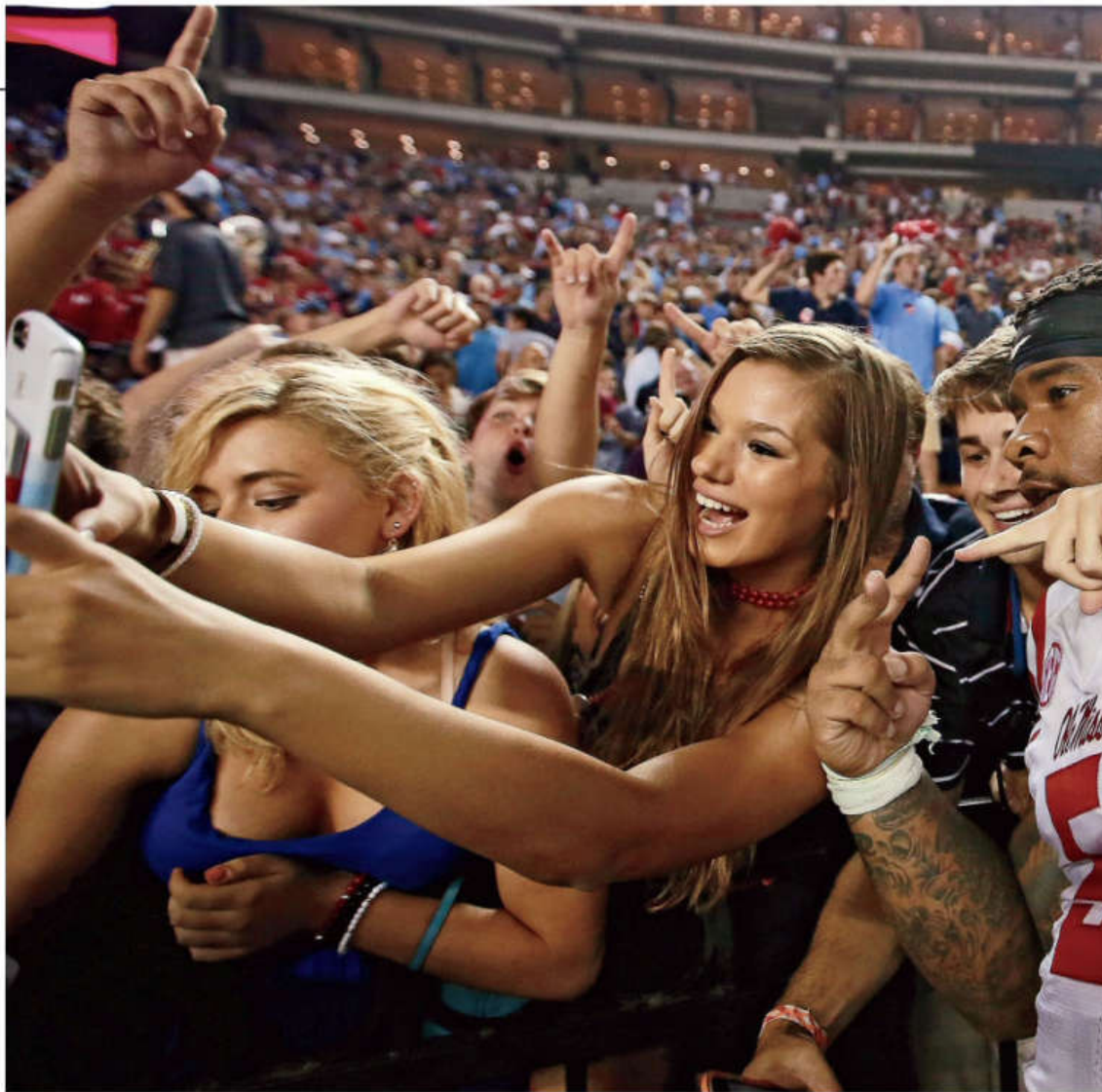
I'm starting to get excited for football season at the University of Mississippi.

WEEK 4

The day before the game, Daymon and I meet with three women who work at the university's William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation. The institute is doing some of the most creative and necessary work around race in the country.

Melody Frierson, a black Korean woman, and two white women, April Grayson and Jennifer Stollman, sit down and talk about the challenges affecting the university, region and state.

They tell me that the university is changing, maybe a bit too slowly sometimes, but that they're thankful that staff and administration are now aggressively asking for tools and the language to confront not just white supremacy but also



Oxford remains an often-complicated mix of progression and segregation, and a mirrored love for symbols of the Confederacy and for the predominantly black football team.



homophobia and sexism. They highlight the crucial intersectional work being done at the Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies and the Southern Foodways Alliance.

"It doesn't mean that the black students specifically don't suffer anymore, though," Jennifer tells me. "It does mean that they don't suffer as much as they did, and when they do suffer, they don't suffer alone. We're here. We're also seeing how the Black Lives Matter movement has positively impacted the work we do."

Melody laughs when I tell her that I'm going to the Grove the next day before the game. The Grove is 10 acres in the center of campus where thousands of students and alums drink, eat and tailgate on football Saturdays. "I'm critical of everything this place was and can still be," she says. "But I still say to everyone in the country, 'You don't know how to tailgate like we do.' You'll see it tomorrow, Kiese. I hope you're ready to Grove."

I'm not ready to Grove.

Daymon and I leave the Winter Institute to go meet Sierra Mannie across campus. Sierra, a black student from Canton, Mississippi, is a contributor to Time.com and the opinions editor at *The Daily Mississippian*, the school's student paper.

Near the end of our hourlong conversation, I tell her that people seem fixated on this idea of the university and the region changing but that I'm curious whether black students have been central to or on the periphery of that supposed change.

"This is my school," Sierra says, taking her hat off and revealing this unexpectedly fresh green hair. "I understood from the day I got here that this is college, not a Confederate day camp."

Damn. This is how they do in Oxford.

FIRST GAME DAY: UT MARTIN

We're late. We get to the Grove around 9:30 a.m.

Tents filled with catered food are everywhere. I just passed some students making a pug do a keg stand next to a huge blowup of Colonel Reb.

"What's the angle for the story?" Daymon keeps asking me. "You think you want to talk to some people in their tents?"

I tell him that he can talk to people if he wants but that I'd rather just watch. I've never known happy things to happen to black folk in Mississippi when asking questions of drunk white Mississippians proud to call themselves Rebels.

Daymon asks a group of older white folk whether he can take a picture in their tent. The group has white candles, a blue Rebels helmet and a huge silver vase filled with sunflowers sitting in between two mirroring pictures of Colonel Reb.

After Daymon takes a few pictures, one of the women asks what magazine he's with.

"ESPN," he tells them.

She curiously looks up at me.

"Oh, well, do y'all want something to eat?"

"Thanks," I tell her. "We good."

"You sure?" She hands us some bottled waters.

"Here you go. Take these, at least. It's hot out here."

A band starts playing this mashup of "Amazing Grace," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Dixie," a Confederate anthem that originated during the minstrelsy era of the 1850s. I'm standing next to a middle-aged black woman and black man in matching jean shorts outfits. They look slightly less confused than I am.

The woman starts to clap near the end of the band's performance.

"You clapped for 'Dixie'?" the man asks.

"They play that one song at my church," she says.

"Right," he tells her. "But you clapped for 'Dixie,' though?"

"I'm here," she says, as the entire Grove erupts in a chant of Hotty Toddy. "You asked me to come. I'm here."

Between the first play of the game, when Chad Kelly throws a 27-yard rope to Damore'ea Stringfellow, to early in the second quarter, when 296-pound defensive tackle Robert Nkemdiche tiptoes the sideline for a 31-yard touchdown, I fall in love with the Mississippi football team.

As impressive as the team's 76-3 victory is, watching the fair and honorable way the student-athletes listen to each other, encourage each other, critique each other on the sideline—it makes me think I'm looking at a championship team.

I think I know what Hotty Toddy is.

SECOND GAME DAY: FRESNO STATE

I'm watching in a Marriott bar outside of Detroit.

Mississippi is up by 50 in the fourth quarter when a short white man wearing a purple LSU hat sits down. "Leonard Fournette is old-school tough," he says. "He can win games by himself. We're a hard team to beat."

"We are too," I tell him, wearing the same good-luck uniform I wore to my first game in Oxford. "Chad Kelly, Jaylen Walton, that whole receiving corps, those jokers are the real deal. And our defense! As good as Fournette is, Nkemdiche is the best player in the country. Believe that. The only way we don't beat Alabama next week is if we run out of gas. I'm serious. We don't expect to lose." We.

After the game, a 73-21 dismantling, my cellphone rings.

It's Grandmama telling me she's not coming to Oxford for Christmas. Grandmama has never been to Oxford. She just remembers how white folk went to war with themselves in 1962 over James Meredith's desire to learn in their school. Grandmama doesn't think James Meredith should have fought to learn next to folk morally beneath us. I tell her that I understand her point but that if he hadn't fought, maybe I wouldn't have even been selected for the fellowship.

"Those folk at that school won something when you decided to accept that fellowship thing," Grandmama says. "You know, I'm so glad you'll be closer to home, Kie, but you didn't win nothing."

Everyone in my family knows not to question Grandmama when she makes a proclamation, so I ask a related question. Why did she stay in Mississippi in the 1950s if there are so many parts of our state she's still afraid of traveling to, while hundreds of our relatives left Mississippi for hopes of economic freedom in the Midwest.

"The land, Kie" Grandmama says. "We worked too hard on this land to run. Some of us, we believed the land would one day be free. That's all I can tell you."

I ask her whether the land is free now.

"These white folks ate good off of our work for long as I been alive," she says. "I'm tired, Kie, and I love my life, but I know what all we worked for. I know what we supposed to have. They know what we worked for too. These folks, they know what they took."

THIRD GAME DAY: ALABAMA

I'm trying to sleep on a twin bed in a tiny boutique hotel in Brooklyn. I'm here for the Brooklyn Book Festival. I want to sleep in my own bed, in my own state.

I miss Oxford.

I just watched Mississippi beat Alabama in Tuscaloosa on ESPN. Professor Derrick Harriell, whose work at the University of Mississippi is another reason I accepted the residency in Oxford, messaged me throughout the game.

Derrick's loving words about the football team's will and work reminded me that Mississippi is the greatest and the most maligned state in this country because of the force, brilliance and brutal imagination of its workers. Our literary workers, culinary workers, field workers, musical workers, educational workers, athletic workers, justice workers and injustice workers have shaped national and global conceptions of what's possible.

Tomorrow, at the festival, I want to talk about why James Baldwin, a New Yorker born a few



Kiese Laymon, here at the John and Renee Grisham Estate for Writers in Residence, is the author of the novel *Long Division*.

miles from my hotel and perhaps the greatest literary worker of the 20th century, wrote, "I was going to be a writer, God, Satan and Mississippi notwithstanding."

Tonight, I'm thinking hard about the student-athletes working on that field in Tuscaloosa.

I get out of bed to reread the letter Grisham and others wrote about the flag. I'm wondering how honorable it is to make money writing about the unpaid labor of student workers who come from families bearing the brunt of American racial terror. Instead of talking about how we can justly compensate these brilliant young workers, I feel compelled to write about whether they should perform under a humiliating state flag for a team called "Rebels."

Of course they shouldn't. Of course it's unfair, disrespectful and anti-black. But it's also a nearly insignificant part of what needs to change.

Last month, when asked in *Time* what it would take to finally have the state flag taken down, Grisham responded, "The flag will be changed, eventually. But it's Mississippi, and change is painfully slow."

Grisham is right, and he—as much as anyone in this country—knows that paradigm-shifting change will remain painfully impossible in Mississippi and the nation if we insist on targeting the symbolism of the insult while neglecting and often benefiting from the ongoing violence of the injuries. American—not simply Southern or Mississippian—investment in the pilfering of black American life, labor and liberty is the injury on which our nation feeds. It just is.

We do not have a chance in hell of "fixing" or reforming that national truth with a local lie. I learned that in Mississippi.

WEEK 7

I'm back in Oxford, sitting on the porch waiting for Grandmama to call and tell me whether she has reconsidered coming to Oxford for Christmas.

"The Ole Miss boys, they didn't give up when they could've," Grandmama says when she finally calls. "I thought they were close to running out of gas, Kie. You didn't tell me they had so many black boys on the team. I prayed for every last one of those boys and their mamas last night. I prayed for the white ones, the black ones, the Mexican ones if they on the team too."

"Why?" I ask her.

"Because you live up there with them now."

I ask Grandmama if she might come up to Oxford if I get tickets to the next game, against Vanderbilt.

"Well." She pauses. "Well," she says again. "Kie. I can't bring a wheelchair to no ballgame. The best seat I can get is probably right up under this TV. I reckon I'll watch the rest of Ole Miss games on TV this year, though. To tell you the truth, I hope Ole Miss win every game. I reckon they will too."

"You do?" I ask her. "Why?"

"Because you live up there. And like I said, they didn't give up when they could have. They kept on going when that maroon and white team looked so strong. It's like they were playing on faith. Those boys worked hard and found a way to win that ballgame. That's why," she says. "For all that those boys have been through, and all the work they put in up there in Oxford, they deserve to win it all. They really do deserve that." ■

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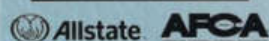
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Searching for Aaron Rodgers

Jared Goff, a spread quarterback with dropback skills, has the Cal Bears rolling and NFL scouts scratching their heads.

BY TIM KEOWN

FORWARD



he moment never lasts anymore. It rolls past, maybe slowing slightly as it nods from the passenger seat, rushing to get somewhere else. So when the relatively

anonymous freshman quarterback of a 1-11 team becomes the record-breaking quarterback of a rejuvenated Cal program, the moment hangs around just long enough for the speculation to begin. Sure, everything looks great against Texas and Washington State, but how will the kid's arm translate to the NFL? As fast as a Jared Goff pass travels downfield, *now* can become *next*. Time to enjoy the moment? Sorry, kid—it's already gone.

Goff, the top-rated QB in the upcoming draft, according to most experts, is about to enter a world where accomplishments serve only as a warning to scouts: Don't mistake stats for a superior skill set, lest another sure bet goes bust on your watch. For now, though, Goff's fleeting moment is here, and it looks like this: There are four grown men waiting outside a gate at Memorial Stadium as the junior walks through on his way to his Tuesday afternoon news conference following a Sept. 26 win at Washington. They want his autograph, and they care enough to know Goff's schedule and stake out his route. The 20-year-old who stops and signs for these four men is about 25 pounds heavier than when he arrived on campus two years ago as a 6-foot-4, 185-pound freshman with pipe-stem arms and the legs of a tall bird. He has also gained more confidence, as well as a few more miles of passing yardage, and he exists squarely within that sweet spot between being unknown and overanalyzed, the moment nodding from the passenger seat.

What makes Goff different is that he appears to have emerged in the moment fully formed, unlike those higher-profile prep passers who sign with higher-profile programs and seemingly receive a draft grade the minute they put on a college



Thanks to Dykes' Bear Raid offense, Goff and his teammates are now the talk of Berkeley.

BEAR IN MIND

NFL scouts may not yet know what to make of Goff, but Heisman voters will be hard-pressed to ignore the records he is piling up at Cal.

COMPLETIONS OF 20+ YARDS

28

Goff has 28 completions of 20-plus yards, tops for Power 5 QBs and on pace to beat his total of 50 last fall.

CAREER PASSING YPG

314.2

Goff tops active FBS QBs with 314 career passing ypg, 34 more than No. 2 Brandon Doughty [Western Kentucky].

TDs UNDER PRESSURE

16

His 16 TDs vs. the blitz ties Goff with Michigan State's Connor Cook for most without an INT since start of '14.

THE GROWTH OF GOFF

	2013	2014	2015
COMP%	60.3%	62.1%	70.2%
YPA	6.6	7.8	9.2
QBR	55.8	76.3	80.0

All stats through Week 5 and courtesy ESPN Stats & Information.



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uniform. It's as if Goff sprouted whole from the earth, planted for the sole purpose of being the face (if he chooses to leave Berkeley early) of this QB class, one that, like it or not, has become emblematic of a swirling debate over the future of quarterbacking.

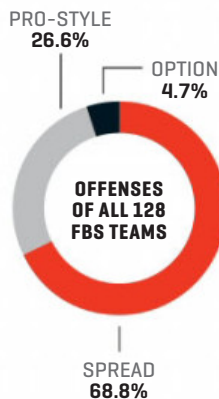
The dilemma, at least through NFL eyes, goes something like this: Spread offenses have sped up and dumbed down the college game, creating QBs who believe every receiver has a God-given right to be wide open and every defense will remain eternally on its heels. NFL types lament the trend, believing it leaves even the best quarterbacks unprepared for the sophistication of their pro game. In a September article titled "Why the NFL Has a Quarterback Crisis," Colts offensive coordinator Pep Hamilton went so far as to tell *The Wall Street Journal* that "you have to teach these kids the absolute basics." And it has become increasingly difficult to argue with him. With every game that Colin Kaepernick throws four picks, or every mention of the utter confusion of recent Heisman winners Robert Griffin III, Johnny Manziel and Jameis Winston, Hamilton's claim is bolstered. Some NFL coaches have even reported coming across rookies who can't identify the Mike 'backer, which is as alarming as an accountant who can't add and subtract.

Into this fray comes Goff, that most enigmatic of hybrid creatures, a QB with dropback (read: pro-style) sensibilities and intangibles who excels in coach Sonny Dykes' air raid offense (read: the spread of all spreads). Way back in 2013, Goff and Dykes showed up at Cal surreptitiously—Dykes replaced the pro-set-minded Jeff Tedford, who had actually recruited Goff, then ESPN RecruitingNation's No. 20 pocket passer out of Marin County, California. That first year, Goff, the only true freshman to start an opener in Cal history, led a team that could beat only Portland State. As Goff traveled across campus, he heard about football only when a student told another unfunny and unoriginal joke. "I'd put my head down and keep walking," he says. With a vibe that was more laid-back surfer than BMOC, the gangly Goff went more or less unnoticed.

Through three games as a freshman, he was leading the country in passing yards per game. Then, at Oregon in a driving rainstorm, he had to be pulled from the game because he couldn't hold on to the ball. Afterward, he manned up, took the blame and avoided excuses. At some point during that season, his father, Jerry, who played baseball at Cal and was an MLB catcher over six seasons, pulled his son aside and said: "You know what,

SPREAD THICK

The NFL's cry of a dearth of pro-ready QBs is up for debate. What's certain is the spread of the spread in the college game. For proof, we asked Insider Phil Steele to identify the scheme of every team.



POWER 5



GROUP OF 5



INDEPENDENT



*Each of these conferences has one or more teams that run the option.

“WHAT WE ASK JARED TO DO IS MUCH HARDER THAN WHAT HE’LL BE ASKED TO DO IN THE NFL.”

CAL OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR
TONY FRANKLIN

buddy? You're going to learn from this. Do you like how this feels, getting your ass kicked every week? No, because it sucks."

As Jerry recounts the story, it's clear the message was delivered from father to son, one athlete to another, in a more caring tone than the words might indicate. But they're blunt people, these Goffs. Jared was not sheltered from failure or frustration growing up the son of a journeyman who experienced his share of losses and disappointments in 12 minor league seasons. That steeled Jared for that miserable freshman campaign. "There wasn't a lot of blue sky above," says Jerry, "but that year was a blessing in disguise. He learned how to handle adversity and losing, and that's a good experience. He still remembers 1-11."

It was hard for a lot of other folks to forget too. Even the Old Blues who care enough about football to voice an opinion had their pride hurt and wondered if Dykes' Texas roots and air raid system could ever take hold in Berkeley. Meanwhile, the post-Tedford roster was divided between those who were young and talented but not quite ready, and those who were sour and

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undisciplined. Practices sometimes devolved into internecine farce; Goff would throw a pass over the middle to one of his promising freshman receivers and a veteran safety would blow the guy up. It was about the only defense the Golden Bears played that year.

"Trying to impress the coaches, I guess," Goff says now. "You realize you know how to practice when our safeties don't want to hit Bryce Treggs on a post anymore because they know he's going to have to play this weekend."

While his sophomore year extended Cal's bowl drought to three years, Goff did lead the team to five wins, and his 331 passing yards per game and 35 touchdowns both ranked fifth in the nation. Those numbers, coupled with his big arm and sound footwork, prompted draft analysts to move Goff up their draft boards this offseason. But not even the most prescient of college football analysts could have foreseen how Goff would seize his junior year: Cal started 5-0 for the first time since 2007 and earned its first AP Top 25 ranking since 2010. Of course, an October gauntlet that includes games against three Pac-12 heavyweights (at Utah, at UCLA and USC) and an early November trip to Oregon will ultimately determine whether Goff and the Bears are contenders or simply spoilers.

Assuming Cal holds its own, that stretch could also help Goff overcome a perceived East Coast bias, with a media that seems to pay attention to only two West Coast teams, Oregon and USC. Were he throwing for the Ducks or Trojans, Goff's early résumé would surely have him at the forefront of the Heisman race: Through five games, he completed 70 percent of his passes for 326 yards per game as he closed in on 10,000 yards in less than three seasons. And his ability to throw an accurate deep ball is nearly unmatched. His 61 percent completion rate on passes thrown at least 20 yards downfield through Week 5 is second among qualifying Power 5 passers. All this while playing behind an iffy offensive line. Yet Goff has always stood strong in the pocket—"Doesn't see the rush; never bothers him," Dykes says with concision—and the extra weight has given him the heft to bounce

off hits and extend plays. His 5,000-calorie days this past summer—he would send pictures of every meal to Cal's conditioning staff—paid off when he iced the 30-24 win over Washington by running through

Roethlisberger, but if you turned your head just right and used your imagination, you might've caught a glimpse of Big Ben.

Still, the toughness isn't the first thing you notice. Goff radiates unaffected cool—

tacklers to get a first down on fourth and five. The following week, a 34-28 win over Washington State, Goff completed a nifty jump pass after shedding a hit deep in the backfield. It wasn't quite Ben

baseball cap backward more often than not, blond hair in a permanent state of disrepair, brown eyes that always look a bit sleepy. But that's the thing about appearances: They tend to lie, or at least tell only

part of the story. Goff calls himself a perfectionist, and like most of those, he seems a little disturbed by his own obsessions. If he throws a pass to the wrong spot in practice, he has to throw it

his hands move roughly 10 inches to his left shoulder. Then he launches into a detailed description of an incompleteness against Washington, when he threw a pass slightly behind tight end Stephen

about that kind of thing.”

Goff’s mentality has seeped into the Bears’ culture. When the team arrived for practice on the Sunday after the Washington win, the day they appeared in the polls, nobody talked about it. “Nobody even flinched,” Goff says.

“Business as usual.” Dykes laughs: “We didn’t talk about it when we were ranked last in the country, so why talk about it now? We know how fleeting that is.”

Ah, the moment. Don’t let them fool you. Amid their team’s success, Dykes and offensive coordinator Tony Franklin, who followed his boss from Louisiana Tech, still hear all the commotion from their NFL counterparts. It’s a knock on them, after all. And rest assured that talk of a “quarterback crisis” will persist as the regular season becomes the bowl season and the bowl season becomes the draft season. So the question will remain: Is Goff a future franchise quarterback or simply a collection of bloated statistics—23 school passing records at a QB-friendly university, it should be noted—who will crumble at the sight of an NFL playbook? Franklin answers like he’s expecting the interrogation. “What we ask Jared to do is much harder than what he’ll be asked to do in the NFL,” he says with conviction. “The NFL people want to make everything where, ‘We’re smart and you’re dumb.’”

No matter what the NFL might suggest, Franklin and Dykes do not sound like part of a failing educational system. To hear Franklin tell it, Goff has full autonomy during those 10 or 12 seconds before the ball is snapped: “The first thing Jared will have to identify is coverage, whether they’re in a cover 1, cover 0, cover 4,” says Franklin, who is in his third season as Goff’s QB coach. “If he’s going to get a zero blitz where they have too many for us to block, he’s going to have to change the protection. If he’s in a run-pass option and he wants to throw, he may see something that tells him we’re in a blocking scheme that isn’t going to give him enough time to throw. So he’s going to have to change the protection on that. It’s a lot to think about before every single play—and we’re playing fast—but last year I’d say he was right 80 to 85



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to the right spot three straight times before he can move on.

“I know there’s a huge difference between putting the ball here”—Goff holds his hands near his right hip—“and here”—

Anderson after mistakenly expecting the safety to drive in front of the receiver. Goff drops his hands, his shoulders droop, as if preparing to confess. “Trying to be too perfect,” he says. “I kind of obsess

percent of the time. Now I'd say he's a 95 to 99 percent guy, which is phenomenal for what I ask him to do."

Yet overcomplication is both shield and sword for the NFL coach. Sure, Franklin talks a big game, but can Goff pull that off with 11 of the largest, fastest men in the world staring him down? When blitzers encrypt their schemes? When his field is literally cut in half by NFL hash marks? Perhaps those NFL coaches are ignoring the real crisis. Perhaps the very idea that a rookie quarterback should be able to master a complicated system and immediately transform a franchise is a proven recipe for failure. Maybe the suggestion of a "quarterback crisis" is a natural backlash from coaches who are sweltering under the heat of today's win-now culture in a league that lives and dies by the man under center.

Whatever the case, the qualities that are supposedly becoming endangered—pre-snap reads, ability to run through progressions, capacity to move defenders with a tilt of his head or a turn of his shoulder—are Goff's strengths.

"I've heard people say he's better than Aaron Rodgers at this stage," says Washington assistant coach Bob Gregory, who was Cal's defensive coordinator during the Rodgers era. "I don't know about that, but I do know he's really good. I've never been in the NFL, but I've been in college for a while and this kid seems like a no-brainer. He can really put the ball in a tight window, and he can do it under pressure with a quick release."

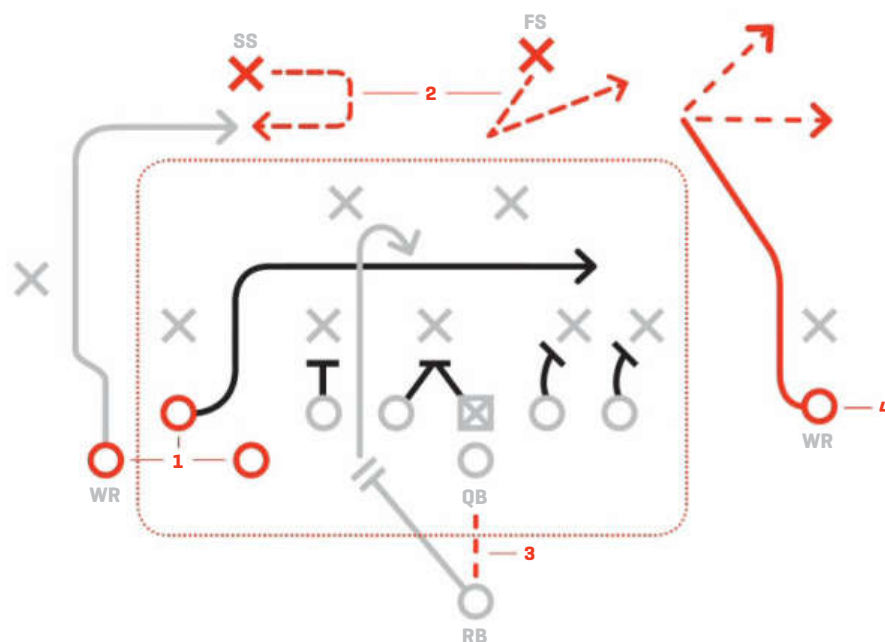
So what does the guy in the moment think? Is he just another shiny product of a gimmicky spread or an old-fashioned, dropback savior for a floundering franchise? The answer to that question—at this particular point in time—concerns Goff not at all. "Throughout my life I've let everything take care of itself," he says, "and it's worked out well."

For now, things are good. Four grown men thought enough of him to hang out and ask for his autograph. (Hey, nobody said this was Alabama.) He's got so much freedom to run Cal's offense that his coordinator has effectively ceded control. He goes to practice every day thrilled that DBs are no longer blowing up his receivers.

Let him enjoy this, will you? It'll be over soon enough, as college tributes take the inevitable turn toward preprofessional critiques. Right now, though, he's exactly who he wants to be: a kid trying to keep the moment alive, live inside it, and make it last as long as possible. ■

SPREAD THIN

On one NFL rookie's first blitz drill in minicamp this year, the "system" QB was utterly lost. *Changing Mike calls. Diagnosing disguised blitzes. Redirecting protection calls. All Greek to him. So what will Jared Goff, he of the Bear Raid, face when he breaks his first NFL huddle? To find out, we diagrammed a bunch formation from the debut of another rookie, Jameis Winston. —BROCK HUARD*



THIS FOR WINSTON

1 On Tampa Bay's second possession, Winston lines up under center, three receivers bunch left and 15 players in all crowd the line of scrimmage. It's like playing in a phone booth.

2 As soon as Winston gets under center, the safeties jockey in and out, masking their looks. That means Winston, pre-snap, must decipher: Is this zone? Man? Blitz?

3 Winston takes a deep, seven-step drop at full speed. As the pocket collapses, he hitches once, diagnoses that there's no hot read and releases the ball. All in 2.5 seconds.

4 Expecting WR Vincent Jackson to break sharply, Winston throws an out route. Instead, his WR beats the DB and takes the high-angle corner. The pass falls incomplete.

THAT FOR GOFF

College features wider hash marks, leaving far more room for Cal's sets. Goff's OL splits up to a yard apart (Winston's lines up foot-to-foot), simplifying how opponents counter. The D is spread thin. If it jumps those gaps and Goff gets rid of the ball? Game over. The NFL's stacked LOS doesn't allow that space.

Against Cal's up-tempo system (78.8 plays per game, No. 11 in the Power 5), opponents must line up immediately to keep apace. And because defenses aren't gifted the time to dance around and disguise, Goff has an easier time analyzing the safeties—and fewer potential looks—coming his way.

Goff's post-snap action is decidedly less taxing. Exactly 95 percent of his attempts have come from the shotgun in 2015, so no dropback is necessary. And his system's built-ins—multiple options he checks off based on opponents' looks—help negate the burden of diagnosing opposing D's.

Just about the only carryover Goff can take with him to the next level? The skill to read how a DB is playing a route, and from there, the ability to make a split-second decision that matches his receiver's. Still, a learning curve is likely in store: There is a big difference between a fast O and a hurried one.

All stats through Week 5.

JUST ASK

*Add gelato to
my shopping list.*

How is traffic?

*What's on my
calendar today?*

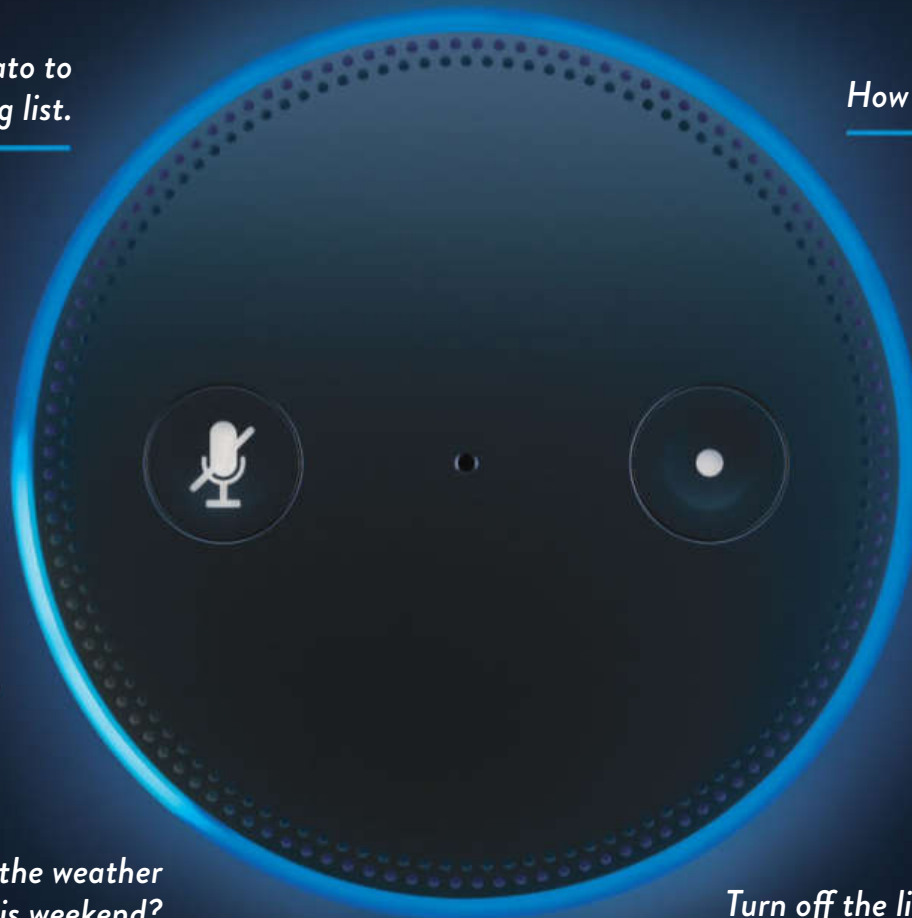
*Set a timer
for 3 minutes.*

*Play my "New
Artists" Playlist.*

*What's the
news today?*

*What's the weather
like this weekend?*

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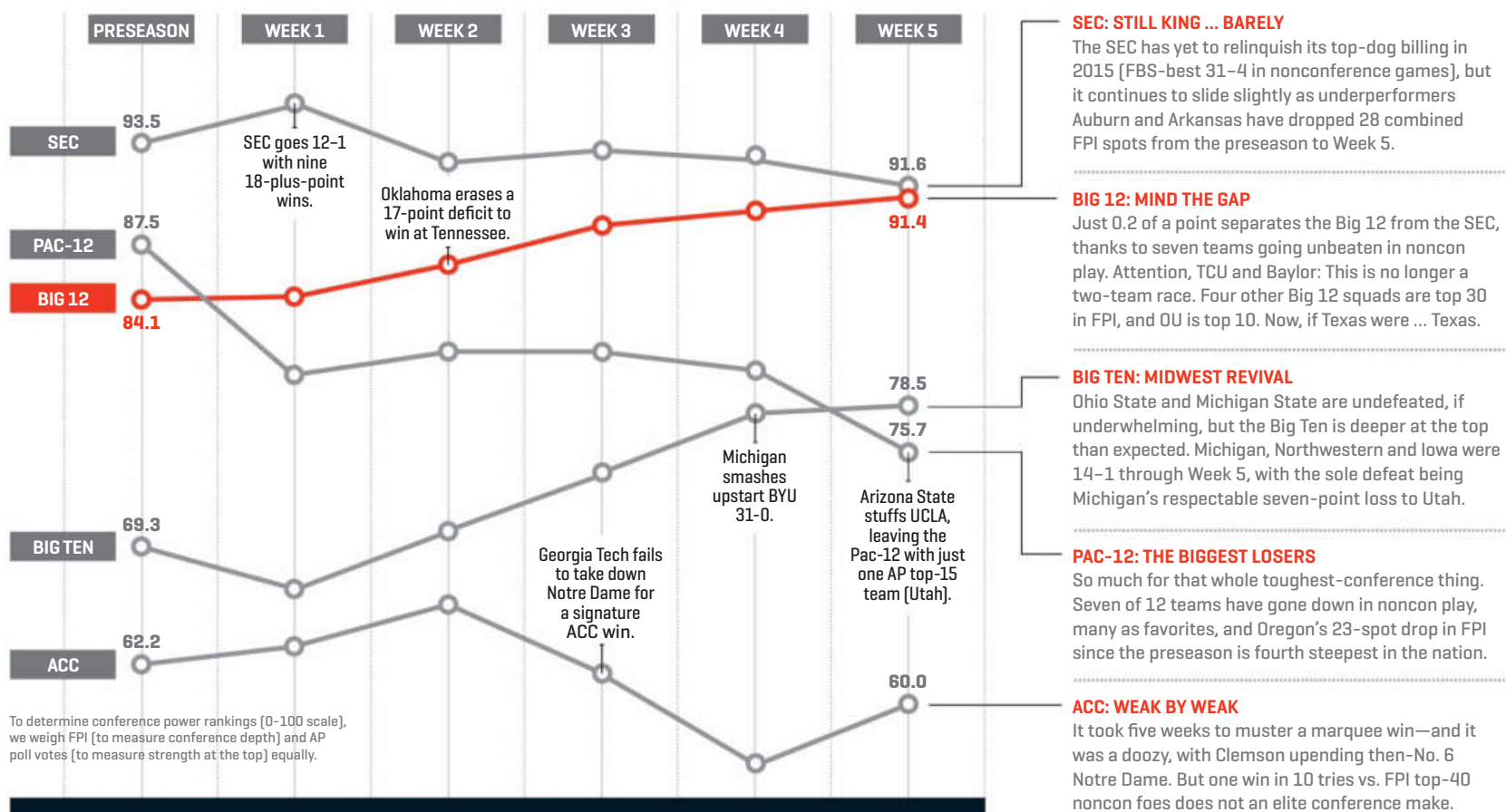




TCU, Baylor and [surprise] Oklahoma have the Big 12 trending way up.

The Power of 5

The heart of conference play is upon us, so we ran the math to find out what's up (Big 12) and down (Pac-12) in the weekly college conference power rankings. —BY SHARON KATZ



Rankings and stats through Week 5.



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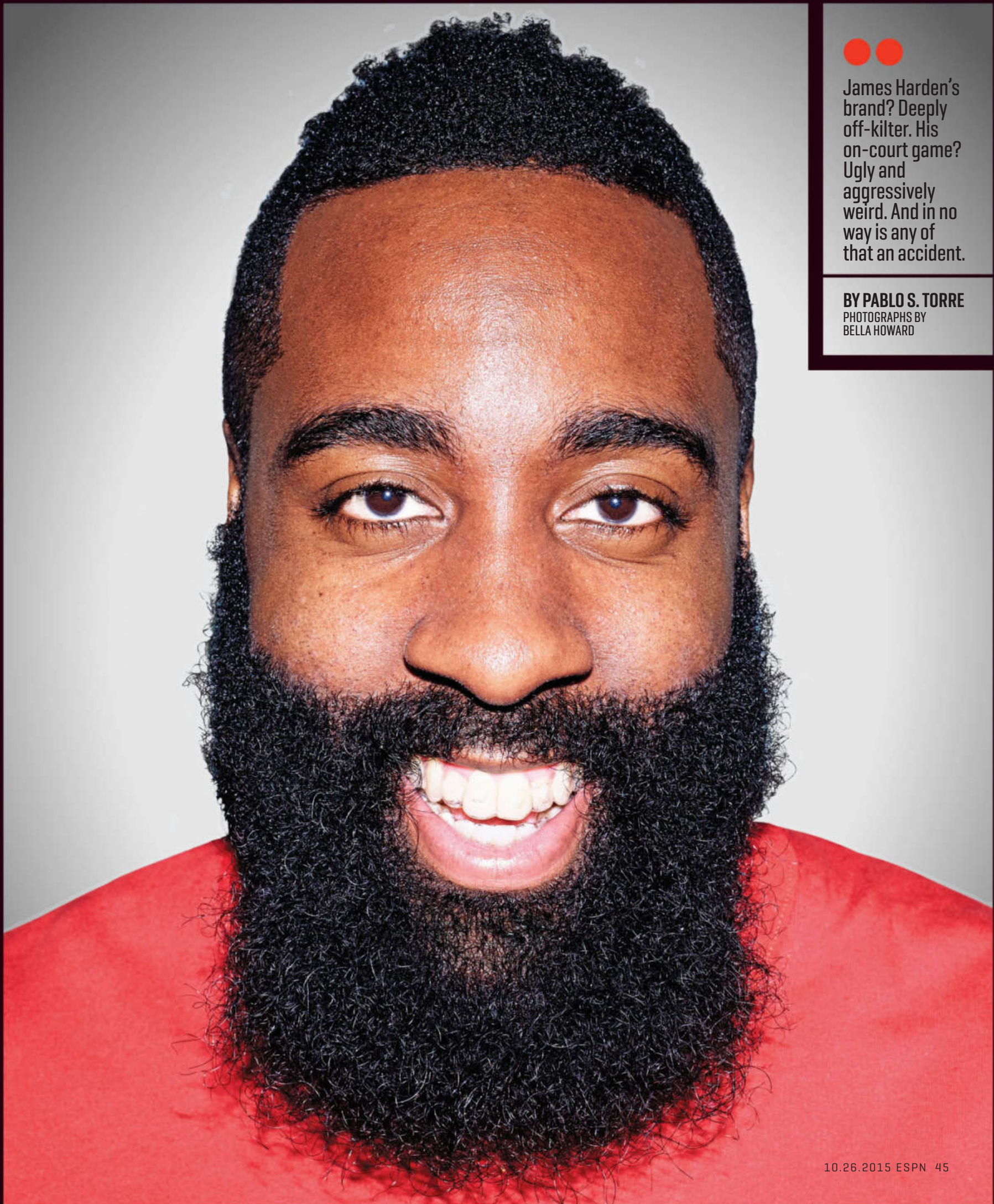
10.26.2015



HOW DO WE frame the coming NBA season? Is it LeBron James' NBA, the plaything of a prodigiously powerful team builder? Is it James Harden's NBA, the hardwood stage for an aggressively weird piece of human performance art? Is it Kevin Durant's NBA, a yearlong final exam on the future of a franchise? Is it Brandon Armstrong's NBA, an amusing little thing to be parodied and commodified? Or is it the Warriors' NBA, an experiment in discovering if pace-and-space 3-jackers can win multiple titles? (Spoiler alert: no. We're picking the Cavs.) Regardless of framing, let's agree not to put this season in a box. Because if we know anything about the NBA, it's this: The distance between winning and losing a title can reside in the space between finger and thumb.



**A MYSTERY
WRAPPED INSIDE
AN ENIGMA
SHROUDED IN
A BEARD**



James Harden's brand? Deeply off-kilter. His on-court game? Ugly and aggressively weird. And in no way is any of that an accident.

BY PABLO S. TORRE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
BELLA HOWARD

JAMES HARDEN SAYS AN INCREDIBLE AMOUNT OF NONSENSE.

I do not mean this figuratively. Whole swaths of his vocabulary are, like the 26-year-old himself, self-made, and conspicuously weird, and inexplicable to everyone but the four friends he's trusted since he was a middle schooler growing up in Compton, California. "Our language evolves," says Camilo Valencia, Harden's point guard at Artesia High and the longest-tenured member of his inner circle. "It's what happens when you play video games and listen to rap music all day."

In their vernacular, for instance, the noun *chug* means woman. ("We gonna invite some chugs?" is a typical question.) The adjective *'falo*, meaning excessively flashy, derives from Buffalo, as in Buffalo wings, as in heat. The expression *sah-dah-tay*, signifying agreement, is actually just a catchphrase from the 2001 film

Pootie Tang. That this all sounds impossible for some outsider to decode on the fly is, in fact, the point. "I don't even try, man," says Akili Roberson, Harden's older brother. And for a famously hirsute NBA superstar who cannot plausibly disguise his identity—or his swelling affection for public life—the benefit of a secret language seems self-evident.

It is a viciously humid August afternoon in Houston, and the Rockets guard and I are picking up takeout at the Grand Lux Cafe for lunch. By the time I figure out how to open the passenger-side door and exit Harden's red-and-black Rolls-Royce Ghost, a crowd has begun to swirl around its owner. Harden, it's worth noting, used to wear hoodies out and zip them up all the way to his chin. But this summer—at the mall, at the bowling alley, at the club—



the 6-foot-5 left-hander has embraced what his brother dubs his "breadwinner." "Now," Harden says, "it's just, like, *There's The Beard! There's that guy with the beard! Mom, Dad, there's The Beard!*"

The masses converge. Two stunned Asian fans thank Harden for being their hero. Huddling servers crane necks and unsheathe phones. A chef comes out to hand Harden a card with the URL for a muscle stimulation machine of some



MVP ... BY THE NUMBERS

Harden's 16.4 win shares led the NBA last season. MVP Stephen Curry's total: 15.7.

kind. A mom holding a baby approaches on behalf of her nervous husband. When the Buffalo chicken rolls and crab cakes arrive, Harden will have posed for photos with 16 people.

Which is what happens when you go from being named sixth man of the year in Oklahoma City three years ago to the first-ever National Basketball Players Association MVP in July ... and start dating Khloe Kardashian, one of this

planet's more relentlessly famous people ... and leave Nike in August to sign a 13-year, \$200 million deal with Adidas, globally notarizing your hyperefficient ascension to the top tier of basketball capitalists. "I try to stay level," Harden says. "Even when people are bum-rushing me at Chipotle and I'm trying to order a chicken bowl with extra guac."

That, mind you, is not a hypothetical scenario. Less than 24 hours ago, TMZ posted video of Harden and Kardashian leaving a Chipotle and reported that their to-go bags carried "several chicken bowls, extra guac and water." Add in coverage from People.com, DailyMail.com and the Huffington Post

and I counted shots of Harden from no fewer than five different phones inside the restaurant, including one positioned behind the counter.

Back at the Grand Lux, Monja Willis, Harden's mother, arrives in time to watch the end of today's impromptu photo shoot. Since retiring in 2009 after nearly three decades as a service dispatcher at AT&T, the single mom and her baby boy have been "attached at the hip," Harden says. He got her a house here, just 20 minutes from his own three-story mansion, which he bought for \$2 million from retired Rocket Cuttino Mobley. And she mothers not only his quartet of best friends but also Houston's starting five. "Her coaching on the sidelines," James says, "is, 'Follow through!'"

"It depends on who you're talking to," Monja counters. "If it's Dwight [Howard], I have to tell him to follow through. Or: 'Bend your knees!' And he does it! And it goes in!"

Still, Harden takes care to restrict the venues for his mother's feedback. "He tells me to stay off of Twitter, stay off of Instagram. It's hard. I have to bite my tongue sometimes." She pauses. "Well, a lot."



GETTIN' DEFENSIVE

While no one mistakes Harden for Tony Allen, his effort on D no longer pales as much in comparison to his offense.

101.9

Harden's defensive rating last year, good for only 87th among all NBA guards—but that's 36 spots better than his first season in Houston.

-0.16

Harden's defensive RPM last year, placing him 32nd among shooting guards—quite the upgrade from 2013-14, when he was 66th.

31.3

Harden's usage percentage, the NBA's sixth highest last season. It was his third straight season with top-15 usage.

The Internet, they both understand, is where an Olympic gold medalist and three-time All-Star is accused, routinely, of playing in such a way that debases nothing less than basketball itself. It is where the NBA's best shooting guard, who just towed his team to the Western Conference finals, triggers more comparisons to Lamar Odom, his girlfriend's ex, than Kobe Bryant, his childhood idol. And it is where the news of a \$200 million shoe deal—the ultimate bet on James Harden's image—begets an essential yet unanswered question: Who truly wants to be like him?

IF ONE WERE to envision an ideal summer afternoon for Daryl Morey, the notoriously quantitative Rockets GM, one might imagine him leaning back in an office chair, loafers up on a mess of a conference-room table, savoring a loop of Harden highlights while guzzling Mountain Dew. But one would be mistaken. Morey drinks only Diet Mountain Dew. "You gotta watch this play," he tells me between sips. "This play is f---ing absurd."

Harden, who averaged 27.4 points, 7.0 assists and 5.7 rebounds a game last season, owns a lethally diverse repertoire. When asked about specific on-court influences, he cites three: Bryant's monomaniacal drive (no one carried a heavier offensive load last season than Harden); Manu Ginobili's southpaw creativity (the maestro of the Euro step now deems Harden's the best in the league); and Paul Pierce's blend of pace, trash-talk and step-back jumpers. But it is a more polarizing trait that brings Morey to replay transition buckets with the lonely righteousness of Galileo discussing the orbit of Earth.

"The No. 1 thing that bothers me is this perception that James is somehow 'tricking the game,'" Morey says. "Like he's somehow getting more free throws than he deserves." Last season Harden drained a league-leading 715 of them—31 percent more than runner-up Russell Westbrook. If Stephen Curry embodies the freewheeling, rainbow-launching spirit of the game, Harden suggests a strapping 220-pound tax attorney, systematically exploiting the letter of its laws.

"I'm not necessarily going in there and trying to draw a foul," Harden says matter-of-factly. "But if a person can't guard you, he has to foul you. Or I'm going to score. Every. Single. Time."

On Morey's flat-screen, I repeatedly watch Harden dribble-hypnotize his man, burst toward the rim, invite a defender to swipe at the ball and then torque through the lane like a man exiting a subway car at rush hour. Each of those steps demands a singular talent. But it is also hard to deny that he looks like a dude straining to hear a referee's whistle. If you love free throws, James Harden is most surely your favorite player.

And so a Deadspin post declared Harden the "Loathsome Genius." Vice said "only a sucker or a Houstonian could love him." Morey himself calls Harden "the most scrutinized player in the league" on account of the reams of officiating complaints lodged

by opponents. And while nobody pushed Harden-for-MVP harder, Morey privately informed his prize acquisition that such derision made winning the award all but impossible. Much to Harden's agitation, the balloting—Curry got 77 percent of the first-place votes to his 19—wasn't close.

Three weeks later, in Game 5 of the Western Conference finals, Harden fell apart in a 104-90 road loss, going 2-for-11 from the field with a brutal 12 turnovers. One game after dropping 45/9/5 at home to stave off elimination, it was over. "I was too antsy, doing things I don't usually do," Harden recalls. "And for a year of hard work to end that way? That affected me more than any other loss." In the locker room, Harden broke down and cried.

When I ask Morey what he recalls about Harden's tears, he notes that he's actually found his superstar crying in the locker room two years running. In Portland, in 2014, Harden had dropped 34, only to be knocked out in Game 6 of the first round by Damian Lillard's buzzer-beating 3.

After that dagger, Harden had set two new goals for himself. First, he wanted to tighten his undeniably lax defensive focus and cut back on ball-watching. (He'd rank 10th overall in defensive win shares last season.) Second, he wanted to improve his right, weaker hand. (Per Synergy Sports, he'd rise to the league's 86th percentile on iso drives to the right after ranking in the 56th percentile the year before.) Now, when I ask about his plans for this season, Harden says something you might not expect of a player who relished control of every lever in Houston's offense.

"I'm looking forward to playing off the ball," he tells me. His ultimate objective? Membership in the hallowed 50/40/90 club, reserved for those who shoot 50 percent from the field, 40 from 3 and 90 from the line in a season—which only six men in NBA history have ever done.

Yes, a year after assisting on more 3s in a single season than anyone in history not

named Steve Nash or Chris Paul, Harden wants to let the offense run through point guard Ty Lawson, the playmaker he urged Morey to procure in July. The goal: to manufacture more efficient looks for a scorer whose shot chart already looks like it was crowdsourced at the MIT Sloan Sports Analytics Conference. "He's just amazingly self-motivated," Morey says.

And so it has always been. Harden's family tells how a young, pudgy James carried a basketball everywhere: in the car, at church and even to bed, where he'd sleep with it by his side. One night before school, in fact, when Harden was a bare-cheeked, baggy-shirted ninth-grader, he grabbed a green marker and left his mother a note. Today, 12 years later, she retrieves it for me from its place atop the dresser inside her Houston home.

Could u wake me up at 7:00

And could u leave me a couple of dollars

James then autographed the thing, in loopy cursive, before adding an instruction equal parts pledge and IOU:

P.S. Keep this paper. Imma be a star

ALONG THE BACK wall of the courts at the Legends Sports Complex, a sweltering 100,000-square-foot hangar outside of Houston, Khloe Kardashian sits in a metal folding chair, calmly fanning herself with a white placard that reads RESERVED. I do not know how many events she attends where a middle-aged man named Wally yells things like "Rip! Push! Elevate!" at 250 children as a radio-friendly version of "It's Going Down for Real," by Djnigo, vibrates the skulls of dehydrated volunteers. But here she is, on the morning of the 2015 James Harden Basketball ProCamp, wearing the preprinted Nike T-shirt everyone else is.

No entourage. No video cameras. No security—save for Monja, who is seated next to Kardashian, pre-empting would-be selfie requesters like the Mossad. "No! No! No!" Monja tells a camp staffer, chastising him as he scurries away.

HARD-HITTING REFRESHMENT



Coors LIGHT

#GAMEREADY



This summer
Khloe and James
became a thing.
His mom?
Always a thing.



Monja's protective streak is time-honored, owing partly to her own trajectory out of South Los Angeles. James Harden Sr., whom she never married, was in and out of prison on drug charges, ultimately leaving his namesake's life altogether. She lost two of her brothers in separate homicides, both in 1993. James Jr., by contrast, was nicknamed Lucky, her youngest of three children by 10 years. "I was the mom and the dad," Monja likes to say. Best estimates have her lifetime attendance at James Harden home games at 90 percent.

She was there in grade school, when James was a little-used reserve on his AAU team. She was there at Artesia High, where coach Scott Pera resolved to optimize a chubby freshman, dangling fast food as a reward for every game with more than six free throw attempts (so at least we know whom to blame). She was there at Arizona State, where James became an All-American. She was there in Oklahoma City, where she came to enjoy her son as the NBA's most overqualified sixth man. "He would never get the ball playing with Kevin [Durant] and Russell [Westbrook]," Monja says. "He would always be told, *We don't want you to shine. We just want you to be a part.* So now he's in Houston. And he's shining."

And so it is that at this sold-out camp, which charges \$199 per camper, the 500 kids over today's two sessions imitate Harden's step-backs and twists into the paint. They take the left hand and stir invisible pots, his signature celebration. They relish playing knockout—the only playground game centered on foul shooting—as their camera-toting parents wear FEAR THE BEARD and THE REAL KING JAMES T-shirts on the sidelines.

**"HE TELLS ME TO STAY OFF
TWITTER, OFF INSTAGRAM.
I BITE MY TONGUE ... A LOT."**

JAMES HARDEN'S MOM, MONJA WILLIS

At one point, Wally invites a handful of campers to attempt rip-through layups against Harden, one-on-one. When one boy, no older than 10, is handed the mic and asked how much cash Harden should give him if he scores, he announces, "I want the Adidas money." (Harden, ever the businessman, agrees to \$200.)

When said Adidas money was made official, a company rep had specifically called out Harden's "look and his style on and off the court." But just three years ago, The Beard, which germinated at Arizona State and is currently as long as his visible face, was by no means a logical profit center. After he arrived in Houston from OKC, one player rep even advised Morey that if Harden "had a good agent, he'd be telling him to shave that off, because he won't be able to get any endorsements." Now, of course, it's hard to imagine Harden's lengthening array of sponsors—Adidas, Foot Locker, New Era, BodyArmor, 2K Games, BBVA, Panini, Taco Bell, KT Tape—being pleased with so much as a trim.

In an age in which every individual is a brand, reality television is the dominant genre and "social media strategist" is a job with influence, sheer visibility is currency. And while the James Harden boom aligns with his performance, it also tracks his rise as a one-man meme factory, a case study in how to efficiently leverage the contemporary rules of basketball and promotion. "He's brilliant," one marketer for a rival sneaker company says.

You want to go from obscure to unforgettable? Grow the most famous beard in sports. You want streams of viral content? Be someone whom *GQ* dubbed the NBA's "most eclectic dresser," the guy who answers my question about the aesthetic of his forthcoming Adidas sneaker line with another question: "When was

the last time you've seen anything normal or standard from me?"

As with Harden's on-court critics, the reaction to his mushrooming fame has been far from uniformly positive. Consider the Rockets-Mavericks series in April, when Harden, wearing a long T-shirt underneath a different, shorter T-shirt, sparked a Charles Barkley screed against, yes, men wearing skirts. But rest assured: There is some kind of reaction. Capitalism too can be a game.

"When you're debated every single day," Harden says, "I think it's a good thing. When people forget about you? That's when you should be worried." Few know this better than the woman he's seeing now.

WHEN I SEE Harden next, on a Monday in September, he's rolling through his offseason home in Calabasas, 30 miles from Hollywood, atop one of those two-wheel self-balancing scooters that every person with a million followers on Instagram seems to possess. Over the month since his basketball camp, he has made headlines for his 26th birthday

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A young man and woman are shown in a close-up, smiling and looking at a book together. The man is on the left, wearing a grey jacket over a black shirt. The woman is on the right, wearing a pink and white patterned shirt. They are both looking down at a book with a purple cover that the woman is holding. The background is a soft-focus indoor setting.

3:00 p.m.

I knew I had someone
in my corner.



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NBA PREVIEW

party, which involved a yacht, an all-white dress code, militaristic fireworks and Harden photo-bombing a sleeping Kanye West and Kris Jenner. TMZ has extensively covered his persistent wearing of Nikes out in public, given the Adidas deal. (Harden's Nike contract ran through Sept. 30.) Cameras just tracked him jetting to Shanghai, Khloe in tow, as an ambassador for the NBA.

He is rich enough to have a money-counting machine atop a chair in his dining room here. He is blessed enough to have a hypnotically sparkling one-piece version of his jersey worn by Beyonce at a concert. And yet the most excited I have ever seen him is right now, when he sees the Chipotle bar ESPN has set up for a photo shoot. "Sheesh!" a grinning Harden says repeatedly, rolling rings around the burrito bowl ingredients on his kitchen island. "Chipotle in my house! Who's responsible for this?!"

There is a very *Blank Check* vibe to this Mediterranean-style five-bedroom, as if a preternaturally clever kid has been deeded someone else's fortune. Harden rented it from a man who owns—as the wood-paneled home office reveals—a Doctor of the Year plaque. It sits on a 25,000-square-foot lot with panoramic views of the low clouds topping the Santa Monica Mountains. There's a massive pool and custom movie theater with leather recliners. A tree over the entryway drops black olives that visitors squish underfoot. Not much in the villa is his, save the Xbox playing an early copy of FIFA 16—Harden says "Cookies" after every stolen ball—and the half a dozen friends gathered around it in the living room.

But for Harden, who rents a home in a different Southern California neighborhood every offseason, scouting out prospective purchases, this manse does signal a certain station. The sleepy Calabasas area is best known for having housed Justin Bieber, Drake, The Rock, Will Smith, Jaden Smith, Willow Smith, Jada Pinkett Smith, Miley Cyrus, Katie Holmes, Suri Cruise, Jennifer Lopez, Britney Spears, several of Michael Jackson's family members, Kanye West and, yes, the entire Kardashian bloodline, among other overheated engines of the



FREE FOULIN'

Number of fouls drawn by Harden in 2014-15, 25 more than runner-up DeMarcus Cousins.



tabloid industrial complex. Calabasas qualifies as the epicenter of modern American celebrity, for better and for worse. Compton, out beyond the gates of this subdivision, could not seem further away.

So as Harden gets his mohawk cleaned up by his barber and then dons a high-fashion outfit (red Raf Simons shirt, tan Del Toro shoes, black Balmain jeans), it is impossible not to wonder: How much of all this is artifice? How much of this booming business, this profitable vanity, is authentically him?

In conversation, Harden seems to anticipate such skepticism. He tells me that he's "a guy that's fun-loving, caring and just free." He talks about building his brand by "just being different" but adds, rather conspicuously, that he is also "not really trying to be different. Because this is just how I am."

It's hard to find evidence to the contrary. When I ask the people around him about his self-made language, it's clear the words genuinely confuse both Rockets PR and his own publicist. And when I ask his agent, Rob Pelinka, about the economic brilliance of The Beard, he says, "It wasn't, 'Let's think of what the world wants and make you become that.' It was, 'If this is your swag, if this is what makes you feel like you can become Superman, we're not going to tell you not to wear the red tights with the blue with the 'S' on the chest.'" All of which is to say that however a 26-year-old commits to building his confidence can be authentic in its artifice. Because what the most famous beard in sports has always masked is how very young Harden remains underneath.

HE SPEAKS A made-up language with the same four buddies he's known since middle school. He is extremely pumped about the Chipotle in a house with a silver Phantom in the driveway. He's been using an Invisalign retainer to straighten his top teeth all summer. The cellphone the guard at the gate calls when visitors need to reach the villa belongs to—who else—his mom.

So asking if Harden strategically constructed his image is not unlike asking if he plans to draw fouls on the court. An admission seems irrelevant given the choices he winds up making, which declare exactly what one ambitious young benchwarmer will do

to become a blockbuster leading man. He will master and manipulate games to fulfill a prophecy and make good on an IOU. He will turn the Internet, the place where the world goes to trash him, into the place that makes him a star.

On the morning after the photo shoot, I see that TMZ has just uploaded a video of Harden leaving a Hollywood club and entering an SUV with those same FIFA-playing friends, some hours after we'd parted ways. The headline: "James Harden—Awesome Drunken Pledge to Make Adidas Amazing." Prodded by waiting paparazzi, who ask if his new sponsor is mad about his wearing Nikes, Harden alternates between his private language and quotes like "200 million!" and "Nike is cool, but Adidas is gonna be amazing," before abruptly yelling "*Swag!*" and rolling up the window.

Who knows how many shoes this 26-year-old will end up selling. But when it comes to celebrity in America, this brand of shameless aspiration, of lucrative nonsense, is the very thing Harden claims he isn't: normal and standard in 2015. Monetizing attention, as anyone on reality television or social media can attest, might be the most efficient way to make it from Compton to Calabasas.

Look around. The question of who truly wants to be like James Harden raises another, more relevant question: At this point, how many people truly don't? ■



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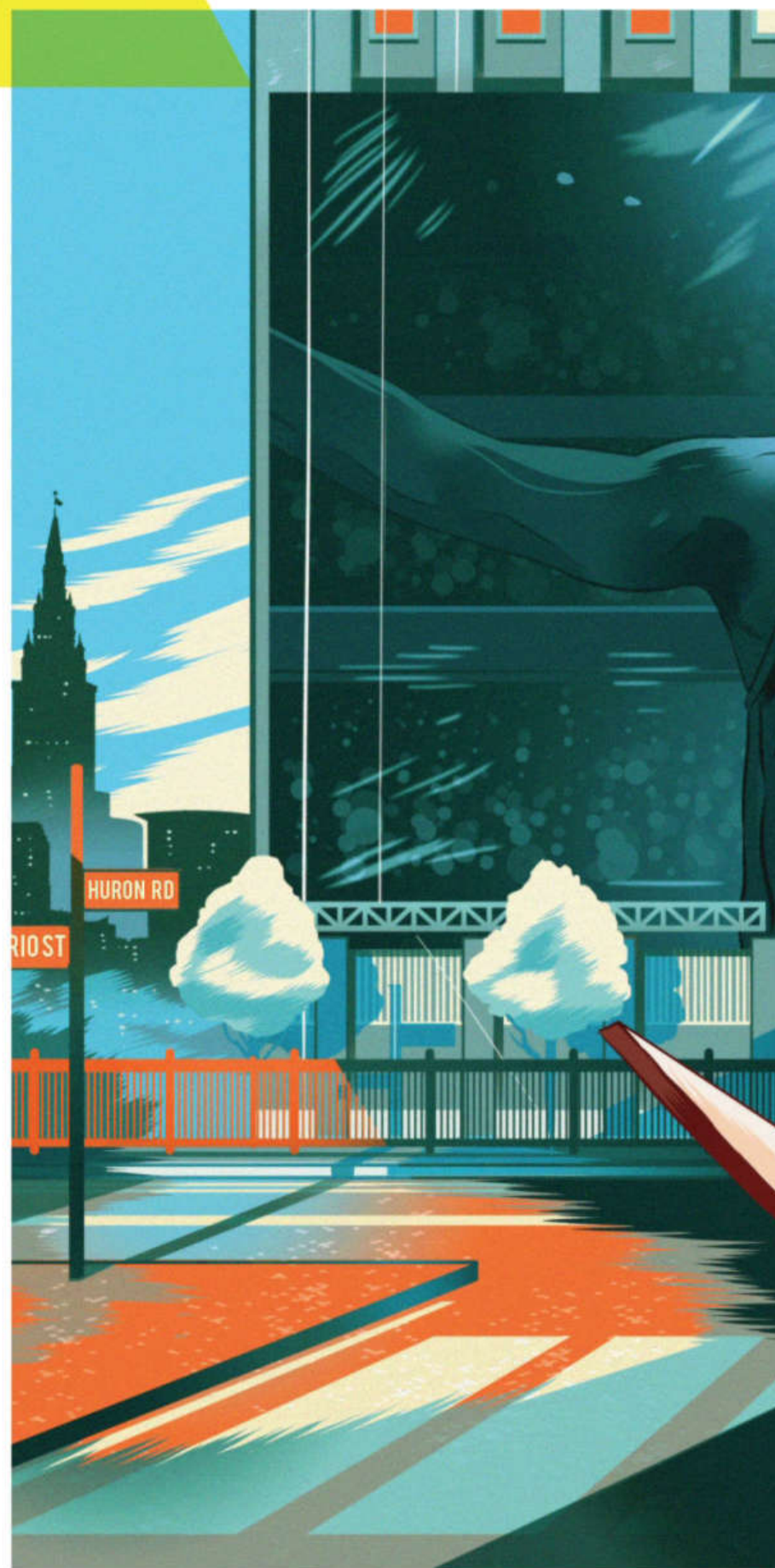
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Brand_17135

LEBRON JAMES WILL TAKE YOUR CALL NOW

Ohio's prodigal son didn't return to Cleveland just to play ball—he came to build an empire. From roster moves to playcalls to cabana-based outreach, behold the unseen machinations of the NBA's most powerful man.

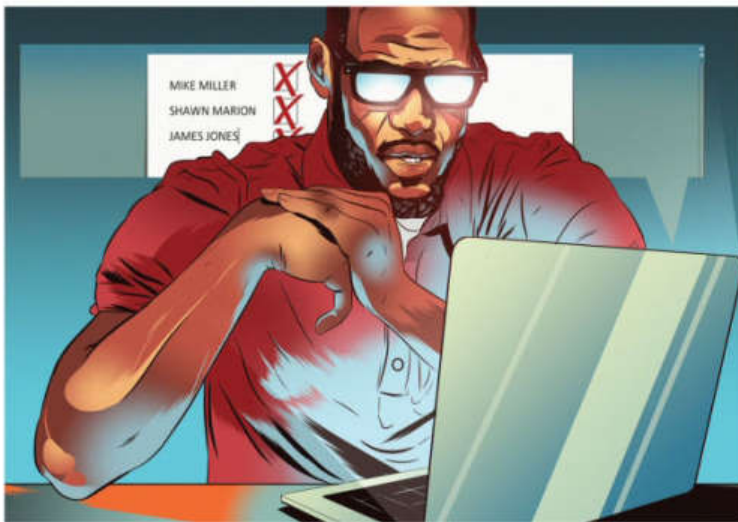
BY BRIAN WINDHORST AND DAVE McMENAMIN
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALEXANDER WELLS





1 LEBRON MAKES HIS FIRST MOVE

On July 11, 2014, LeBron James places three calls, to Dwyane Wade, owner Micky Arison and president Pat Riley, telling each he's leaving the Heat. Then, as his homecoming essay is being read on *SportsCenter*, LeBron calls Wolves big man Kevin Love: "Come play with me in Cleveland." The Cavs had previously been told Love wouldn't sign long-term. But LeBron's call ends with Love saying, "I'm in." Within minutes, Love's agent is on the phone with the Cavs. Within 24 hours, James finalizes his deal. The trade for Love is agreed to within days.



2 LEBRON JAMES: HEADHUNTER

The Cavs are struggling to sign Mike Miller that summer—the Nuggets have offered more money—until LeBron gets involved. The word they receive soon after LeBron's recruiting begins: "It's done." [They actually hear the news from James' agent before hearing it from Miller himself.] At the end of preseason two months later, Cavs GM David Griffin credits James with helping land not just Love and Miller but Shawn Marion and James Jones: "When you cut LeBron loose in the free agency pack, you tend to get results that you don't get otherwise. To say he's been an amazing partner this offseason would be a gross understatement."



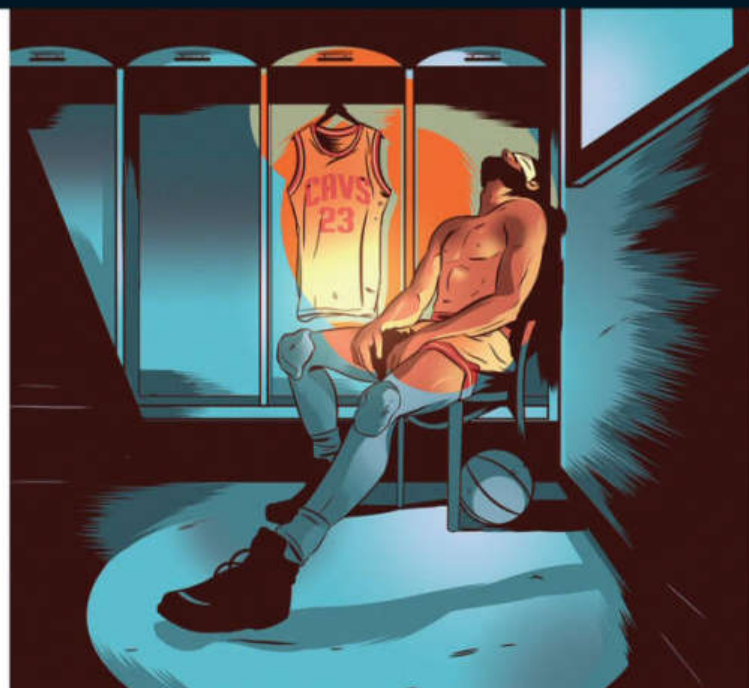
3 MEET THE NEW BOSS ...

Prior to the Cavs' first practice of training camp in late September, LeBron asks new head coach David Blatt if he can hold his own players-only meeting. As the coaching staff waits on the floor, James pulls all the Cavs players into a meeting room and shuts the door, then goes player by player—from stars like Love and Kyrie Irving to training-camp free agents—telling each what LeBron expects from him throughout the season. After the meeting, many of the players say they have never experienced anything like that.



4 A PLAYER-COACH BY ANY OTHER NAME ...

In October, at the Cavs' first intrasquad scrimmage, LeBron gathers his teammates during warm-ups and puts them through their paces, calling out the plays as they run the court in 5-0 offense situations. It's a harbinger of things to come. "The Princeton offense that Blatt installed in the preseason, they just threw that out," ESPN reporter Brian Windhorst notes months later on Bill Simmons' *B.S. Report* podcast. "What typically happens—and this has been happening for like three months now—is LeBron will take the ball and call the play. Blatt will see what play LeBron calls and he'll repeat it to the team. That happens on a regular basis."

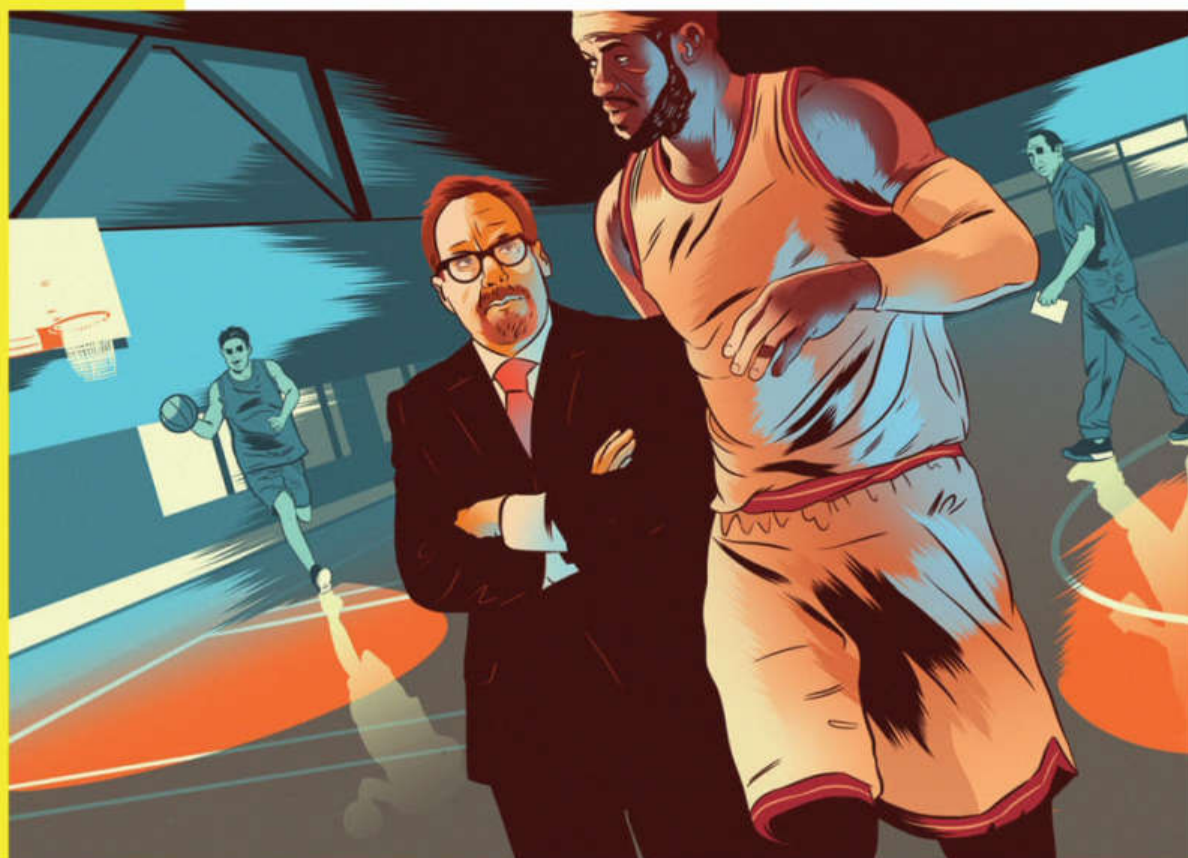


5 LEBRON SITS HIMSELF DOWN

On Dec. 30, suffering through knee and back pain that has hampered him on the court for weeks, James unilaterally makes the call to sit. Says Windhorst on the *B.S. Report*: "LeBron just decided, 'I'm not gonna play.' Like, at the last minute, he told them, 'I'm not playing.' Didn't even come out to the bench, just sat in the back, didn't come out." The Cavs are stunned, but they acquiesce to the decision and agree to two weeks' rest.

6 LEBRON JAMES: HUMAN RESOURCES

While LeBron is out, Griffin approaches James at the practice facility. The Cavs are sinking, in the midst of losing seven of eight games; the team badly needs help on the wing, and Griffin has learned he can get Iman Shumpert from the Knicks for a song—but the price of the deal is to also take J.R. Smith. Griffin wants Shumpert badly, but he's concerned about the enigmatic Smith. When he asks James what he thinks, James says that he's actually more interested in getting Smith than Shumpert. To ease Griffin's worries, LeBron ends the conversation by saying: "Get J.R. here and I'll take care of it."





7 **LEBRON JAMES: DIRECTOR OF DIGITAL OUTREACH**

In early February, with the Cavs fresh off a 12-game win streak, LeBron takes to Twitter: "Stop trying to find a way to FIT-OUT and just FIT-IN. Be apart of something special! Just my thoughts." After first admitting the tweet is a call-out of Love—an effort to engage the underperforming big—LeBron then denies it. Then he owns it again. The back-and-forth keeps the story alive and puts pressure on Love—who in February goes on to post his top monthly plus-minus and 3-point rates of the season.



8 **LEBRON CALLS HIS SHOT**

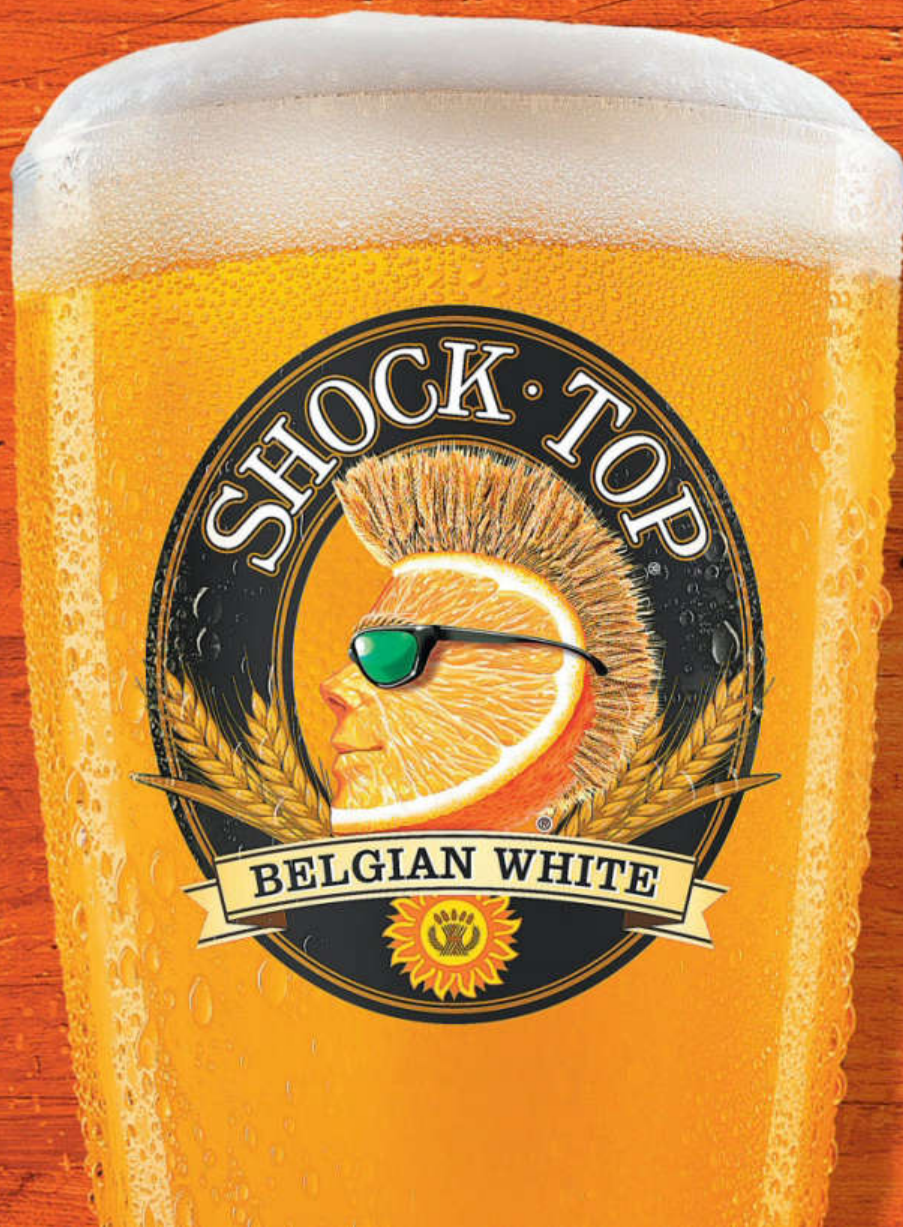
In the final seconds of Game 4 of the Eastern Conference semifinals, with the Cavs and Bulls tied 84-84, Blatt draws up a play that requires James to inbound the ball. LeBron scratches the play, telling Blatt: "There's no way I'm taking the ball out unless I can shoot it over the backboard and go in." He then goes on to hit the game winner on a catch-and-shoot from the corner as the game clock expires. Says LeBron after the game: "I told him to have somebody else take the ball out, give me the ball and everybody get out the way."



9 **LEBRON JAMES: CEO, CABANA RELATIONS**

On June 28, LeBron is in Los Angeles for a camp for college and high school players. He has reserved a poolside cabana at the hotel where he's staying. Love, who's also there, had texted James earlier asking if they could talk. In the previous few days both had opted out of their contracts and become free agents. They agree to talk at the pool in the afternoon. Love pulls up a chair and does most of the talking, but LeBron makes it clear he wants Love back. Three days later, Love announces he's signing a five-year, \$110 million deal with the Cavs. And LeBron wins the world—again. ■

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THE DYNASTY THAT'S NEVER BEEN

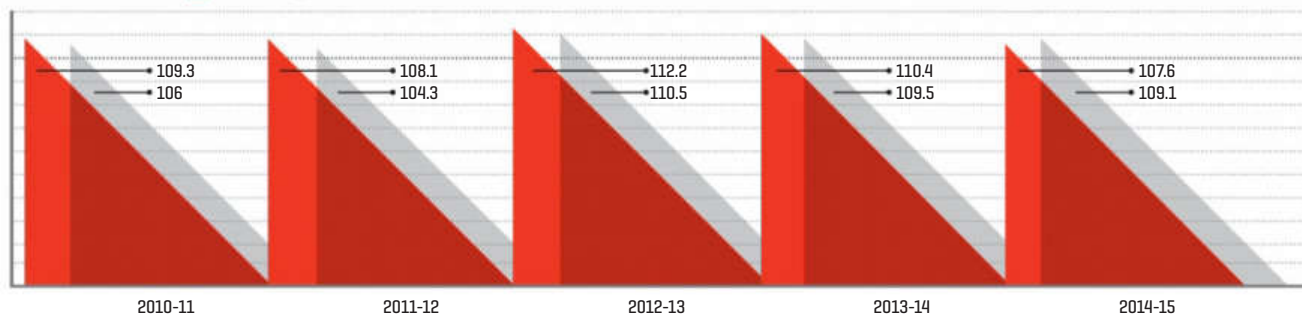
Kevin Durant, the NBA's best player without a ring, has one more season to prove that he and Russell Westbrook can win a title together in OKC. Only the future of his career—and the franchise—depends on it. [No pressure, though.]

BY RAMONA SHELBURNE ILLUSTRATION BY 168 STUDIO

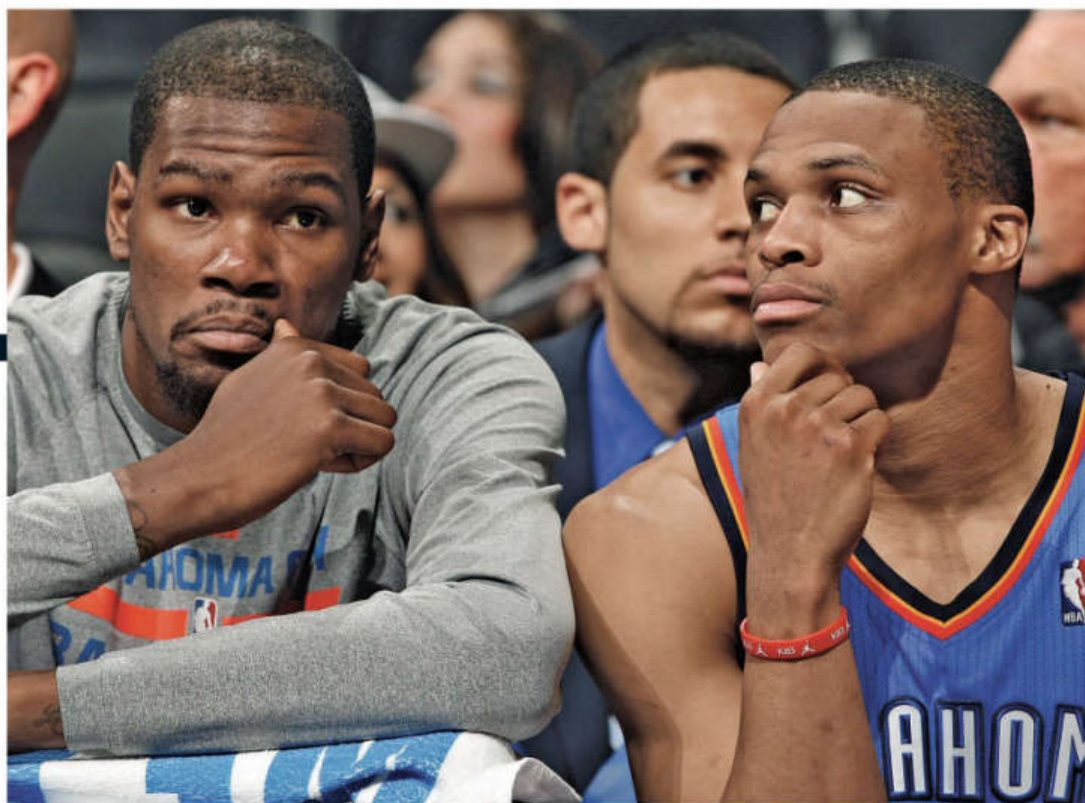
HOW THE THUNDER PLAY WITH THE DUO TOGETHER (AND NOT)

TEAM OFFENSIVE RATING

TOGETHER SEPARATE



NBA PREVIEW



KEVIN DURANT IS quietly shooting free throws at the Thunder practice facility, his face expressionless. Dribble, spin, breathe, shoot. During games, he sometimes adds the slightest of shoulder shimmies, but on this Monday morning before training camp, he plays it straight. Dribble, spin, breathe, shoot. On the basket to his right, teammate Russell Westbrook is deep into his own routine. He breathes from his belly, taking his right hand up toward the top of his chest as he inhales, then swiping it down and away as he exhales, as if exorcising something.

Two young superstars putting in work, alone and together.

"Kevin was on one basket at 8 this morning; Russell was on the other," says Thunder assistant Maurice Cheeks. "Same as they always are."

In the past five seasons, Oklahoma City has won 266 games, second only to the gold standard set by the Spurs. Durant has won an MVP award, an All-Star Game MVP and four scoring titles. Westbrook has won a scoring title and an All-Star Game MVP. But they are still chasing their first NBA title. With Durant hitting unrestricted free agency next summer amid whispers of discord between them, this season might be their last chance to grab it.

Not long ago, their future together seemed limitless. In 2009, when both players were 21, Cheeks would routinely ask coach Scott Brooks, "Did you know they were this good?" By 2012, headed to

the NBA Finals, it seemed obvious how good the Thunder could be. It was a matter of how many titles, not when they'd win their first.

Since then, each attempt has ended in lament. A 60-win season was ruined when Houston guard Patrick Beverley crashed into Westbrook's knee in the opening round of the 2013 playoffs. A 59-win season unraveled after Serge Ibaka's calf gave out before the 2014 Western Conference finals. And last season, a foot injury cost Durant 55 games and Oklahoma City missed the playoffs.

NBA history is filled with great teams with rotten luck. Ask Mike D'Antoni and Steve Nash about 2005 and Joe Johnson's broken face. Sacramento fans still can't believe Vlade Divac tipped the ball right to Robert Horry in 2002. But OKC's string of bad fortune—and the promise wasted—is almost unprecedented. "If [Oklahoma City] doesn't win in the next few years, we'll be looked at similarly to Seattle, with Vin Baker, Brent Barry, Gary Payton, Shawn Kemp," says ex-Thunder guard Reggie Jackson, now in Detroit.

Durant is 27, Westbrook 26. This year's Thunder team is arguably the best one on which either has played. If Durant re-signs with Oklahoma City next summer and Westbrook follows suit in 2017, the Thunder will remain contenders for years. If one or both of them leave, it's time to rebuild. So much of that depends on how this season ends. Will they stay healthy?

When on the court, Durant and Westbrook project to have the best offensive metrics of any NBA duo (plus-13.5 offensive RPM).

Will they play together? Will they be lucky? Will they win?

Except for platitudes spoken at Team USA media scrums and a Players' Tribune pledge to control his own narrative, Durant stayed quiet this summer. But during the first week of training camp, his coolness cracked after ESPN commentator Stephen A. Smith suggested LA is his "primary objective" if he leaves Oklahoma. "Nobody in my family, my friends, they don't talk to Stephen A. Smith. So he's lying," Durant said.

The season will be chaotic and emotional. Durant knows that. He doesn't want to get swallowed up in it by giving thoughts of free agency too much weight too soon. "I hope that every time he's asked about it this year, every single time, he will say, 'I'll talk about this after the season,'" teammate Nick Collison says.

On media day at camp, Durant isn't all smiles while posing for the official OKC team photos, and when a videographer says, "Hey, KD, just wanted to catch up with you on media day," he scoffs, "It's always media day." But then teammate Enes Kanter asks him to take a selfie, and Durant beams. His nature is to connect with people, but having the game taken away from him last season hardened his

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resolve. Assistant Royal Ivey remembers one point last season when Durant was unable to get off the couch without help: "I felt for him because this is all he is."

Durant's mood lightens again during a joint interview with Westbrook near the end of the day. Team broadcaster Michael Cage is asking the questions, but there's a problem: one stool, two players. Durant and Westbrook look at each other and shrug. They sit together, cheek to cheek.

THE OFFICE OF Thunder GM Sam Presti is an open book. Hundreds of magnets decorate the walls, each with a bit of wisdom he has collected: **FOCUS ON THE SIGNAL, NOT THE NOISE**; **OPTIMISM IS THE ENGINE FOR RESILIENCE**; **TO BUILD IS IMMORTAL**. His shelves are filled with architecture and music books. There are pictures of his dorm room when he was a guard at Emerson College and of the seats he shared with San Antonio GM R.C. Buford when he worked there. There's a photo of a Thunder jersey hanging on a fallen tree in Moore, Oklahoma, sometime after a category EF5 tornado destroyed the town in 2013. And there's a picture of Bill Walsh, moments before a Super Bowl, lying on the locker room floor, arms crossed behind his head. "Preparation," Presti says.

He gives a tour to every player the team considers signing. It starts at the Thunder's gleaming practice facility, where every detail has been scrutinized, down to the ideal height of each electrical socket, then moves on to the team's older practice facility, a converted roller-skating rink. The tour finishes at the museum commemorating the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, where Presti says he can tell whether a player understands the magnitude.

Before a recent tour, he studies the evening sky. "You get these incredible reds out here," he says. Rookie coach Billy Donovan is on the lawn behind the practice facility, sweating through his long-sleeve gray shirt. Donovan starts sprinting. Thirty seconds at full speed, a minute to recover. Thirty seconds at full speed, a minute to recover. Over and over again, until he can't do it anymore. After the team missed the playoffs last season, Presti fired Brooks and hired Donovan from the University of Florida, looking for a new voice to lead the team into this pivotal season.

The NBA's new nine-year, \$24 billion media rights deal with ESPN and Turner Sports complicates the Thunder's efforts to re-sign Durant in 2016. The new revenue is projected to spike the salary cap by \$20 million next summer, giving virtually every team the war chest to pursue Durant, instead of just the handful that had sacrificed to make room under the old cap. It was a hell of a curveball to throw at one of the league's most successful small-market franchises. Asked how he feels about the economic shift, Presti bites his tongue and points to a magnet on his office wall that reads: **FORGET IT JAKE, IT'S CHINATOWN**.

If Durant or Westbrook leaves before they win a title together, Presti's thrifty decision to deal James Harden to Houston after the 2012 Finals will loom large. Would he have done the trade if he'd known the cap would expand this year? Did he miss something?

"It would mean that we would've been the only team to act upon

"I WANT TO GIVE THEM THE BEST VERSION OF ME. I CAN'T CONTROL EVERYTHING ELSE."

KEVIN DURANT

that type of information," Presti says coolly.

Instead, he chose to pay Ibaka and fund a deeper bench. He stockpiled picks to replenish the talent, casting off underperforming assets before they were in line for a payday. The idea was to develop players on rookie-scale deals so Durant could picture a future in Oklahoma City.

Can Donovan, a gifted college recruiter, paint that picture? This moment isn't about wooing, it's about winning, he says: "My responsibility is, How do I help him grow? How do I help him get better?"

Presti has been studying Durant, and those questions, for more than a decade. "I don't know if anyone could've done more due diligence on Kevin Durant than Sam Presti did," says Rick Barnes, Durant's coach for his one season at Texas. "I'll never forget him saying to me, 'I've got to get this right. I've got to be right.'" And so Presti knows his franchise player well enough to be sure that Durant's decision will not be about anything other than winning basketball games.

LeBron James left his hometown Cavaliers in 2010 because the second-best player in Cleveland was Mo Williams and Miami had All-Stars Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh. Four years later, when Cleveland had the talent, he went home.

"Every guy is loyal to a certain extent," says Wade, who had workouts with Durant this summer. "Look at [Kevin Garnett]. He was loyal to a fault in

Minnesota, but he left to win.

"As a player, when you have the muscle, you better use it," adds Wade, who was with James on a charter flight from Las Vegas to Miami on the night he decided to return to the Cavs. "It's a business."

THE LAST TIME Durant had a decision of this magnitude, he signed a five-year, \$86 million extension with Oklahoma City in 2010, quietly tweeting out the news the day James broadcast "I am going to take my talents to South Beach." The contrast cast Durant as loyal foil to James' greedy superstar. It made his brand.

Years later, though, Durant questioned the wisdom of giving up his player option in the fifth year of that deal. "To be honest, I just didn't know. I was 21," he said after a Team USA camp in the summer of 2014. "Obviously, when you sign a deal, you want the best options for yourself, the best flexibility. But I loved Oklahoma City so much, I just wanted to be dedicated and show them that I'm all about the team."

Will business considerations drive his decision now? Will loyalty tug at him? People in Oklahoma City feel as if they know him and believe he cares about the things they do: hard work, perseverance, strength. The Thunder franchise was the first in major sports to put down roots in OKC. Durant was the first superstar fans there could call their own. Before 2008, this was a college town. The Thunder

elevated this city. Made the people here feel like their town was growing.

Waynel Mayes was a first-grade teacher at Briarwood Elementary School in Moore on May 20, 2013, the day a mile-wide twister ripped the school's roof off, leveled its walls and buried her and nine students under their desks. As they waited for rescue workers to dig them out, Mayes told her class to sing and bang on instruments until "a hero comes to save us." One of the boys looked out from under his desk and asked, "You mean Kevin Durant?" She laughed. "I meant a fireman or a rescue worker." "Oh man, we wanted Kevin Durant," he said. In the days after the storm, Durant donated \$1 million to relief efforts and walked the streets of the community, telling residents to be strong.

When he signed the five-year extension to stay in Oklahoma City in 2010, just two years after the franchise had relocated

from Seattle, his decision seemed like some sort of validation for the fans. Now, at media day, a local reporter asks him whether he would like to be wooed by those same people now. He's got a script for these questions, but this one requires him to dig a little deeper. "I'm not one of those guys that's living for praise or looking for everybody to ... lobby me or whatever.

"I just enjoy the game. I enjoy these wonderful fans. I want to give them the best version of me. I can't control everything else."

PRESTI'S APPROACH SO clearly mirrors the Spurs' model that it's easy to view Durant as a next-generation Tim Duncan and Westbrook as Tony Parker. But there's only one Tim Duncan. The Spurs are delightfully dull, all business with a ring for every finger. Durant and Westbrook have built bigger brands and brought the limelight to OKC, if frustratingly nothing more.

The core Thunder personnel were all kids when they met up. Presti was 29 when named GM in 2007. Durant and Westbrook were teenagers when they joined the team a few years later. Now they're in different stages of their lives. Presti got married in 2012 and has a 6-month-old son. Westbrook wed his college sweetheart this summer. "It was eye-opening," Durant says. "It showed me that we are getting older and things are changing."

Out on his tour of the city, Presti likes to remind his passengers that change can be good, but so can remembering where you've been. He stops by the old practice facility in Edmond, opens the car door and inhales deeply. Something is rank. "Whoo, you're getting the full effect now," he says, pointing to a dog-food factory. "It's hard to get too full of yourselves when you walk out to that every day."

Even with egos in check, it remains to be seen whether Presti's two alpha dogs can discover how to lead together. This is the year.

"We are not going to bury our head in the sand," Presti says, "and pretend that's not going to be in the air."

Durant and Westbrook have one more chance to elevate each other and to win the Thunder a title. One more season to determine Oklahoma City's legacy.

A potential dynasty depends on it. ■







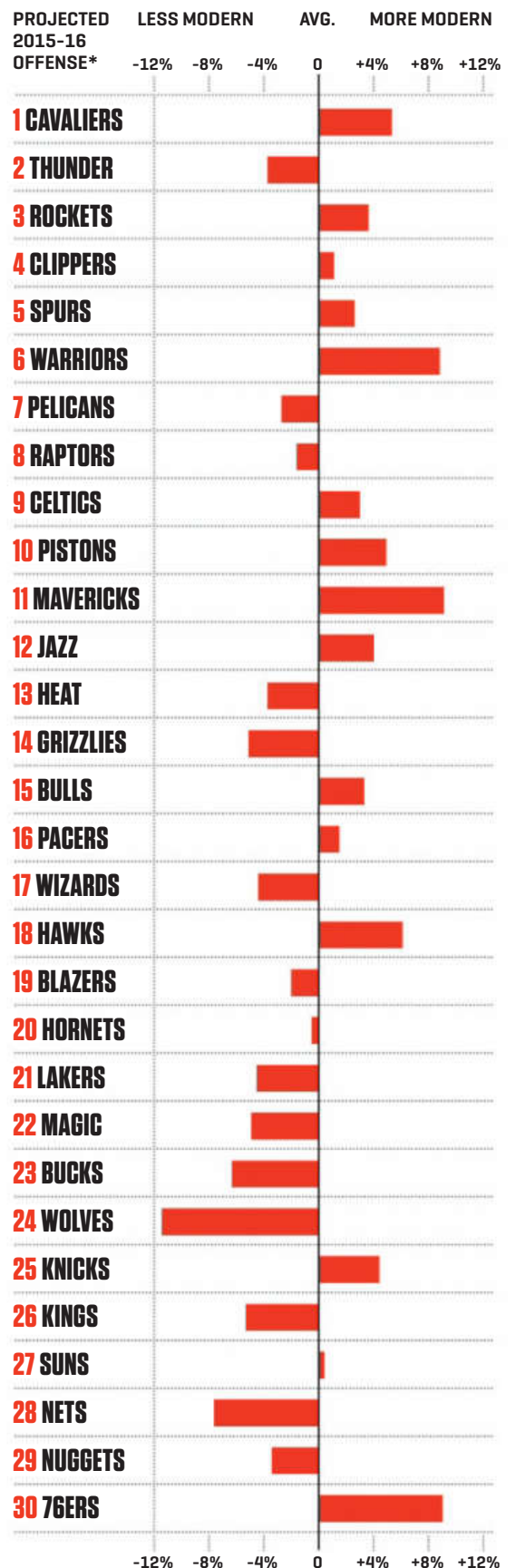
POWER RANKINGS

If the Warriors taught us anything, it's that in today's NBA you must master two philosophies: pace and space. Fast teams create more scoring chances. If they're open looks? All the better. To reveal who makes defenses cover the most space, Grantland's Kirk Goldsberry maps each team's offense. And our NBA experts predict everything else. The big call: a Cavs-Warriors rematch—with a different result.

TEAM OUTLOOKS BY ESPN NBA INSIDERS BRADFORD DOOLITTLE, AMIN ELHASSAN, TOM HABERSTROH AND KEVIN PELTON; HALF-COURT HEAT MAPS AND ANNOTATIONS BY GRANTLAND'S KIRK GOLDSBERRY; KYLE KORVER EFFECTS BY ESPN STATS & INFORMATION

NEW METRIC ALERT!

NBA Insider Kevin Pelton has gone and created a stat—progressive rating—to quantify how modern an offense is, based on projected 3s, pace of play and passing. The conclusion? Modern = good. Unless you're Philly, obvi!



*Teams ranked by projected '15-16 offensive rating. Progressive ratings reflect each team's percentage above or below NBA average.

EAST

1 CAVALIERS

LAST SEASON 53-29

GRANTLAND

For more NBA analysis from Kirk Goldsberry, visit Grantland.com



After falling two wins short last season, the Cavs added backup PG Mo Williams [career 38 percent from 3] and 3-and-D vet Richard Jefferson to deepen an already explosive offense that ranked fourth at 107.7 points per 100 possessions. **LeBron James**, Kevin Love and **Kyrie Irving** have a projected 41.4 WARP [tops among any trio in the NBA, even with Irving sidelined to start the season with a fractured kneecap]. They lead an offense that projects to be almost two points per game *better* in 2015-16. If all three are healthy this spring, Cleveland's 51-year title drought will end. —BRADFORD DOOLITTLE

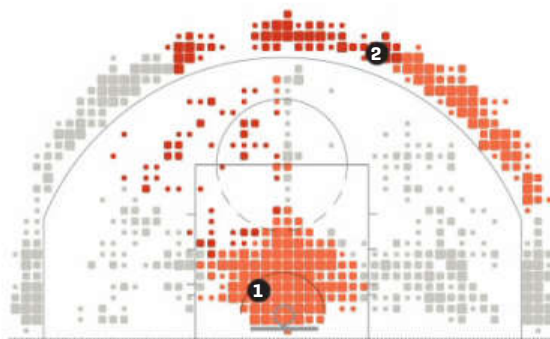
PROJECTED WINS

VEGAS

56.5

ESPN FORECAST

59



PROJECTED LINEUP PG Kyrie Irving, SG Iman Shumpert, SF LeBron James, PF Kevin Love, C Timofey Mozgov

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 8th [442 sq. ft. of above-average offense]

KYLE KORVER EFFECT J.R. Smith [KKE of 93.5] is one of *nine* Cavs who project to shoot above NBA average from 3-point range.

PROJECTED EFFICIENCY

Below average Above average

1 LeBron, generally impossible to stop, was second in FG% [55.1] and ppg [7.6] on drives last season among players with 500 such attempts.

2 Irving is lethal from the top of the key (45.9%), but until he returns, the Cavs will need Love, who drops 41% from the left wing.

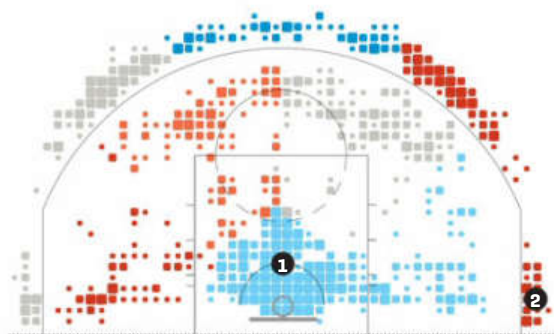
METHODOLOGY

Projected wins From Westgate Las Vegas SuperBook and ESPN's NBA Forecast panel.
Heat maps Using shot data from 2014-15 and projected starters, Grantland's Kirk Goldsberry ranks each team's offensive efficiency based on square footage.
Kyle Korver Effect To identify players who expand offenses the most, ESPN Stats & Information created a metric on a 1-100 scale, factoring in 3PT%, 3 point attempt rate [percentage of total shots that come from 3 point range] and influence on teammate FG%.

2 BULLS

LAST SEASON 50-32

Great news! Chicago returns an NBA-high 99 percent of its minutes from a 50-win team. To cash in on the considerable potential, new coach Fred Hoiberg's task is to find the delicate balance between speeding up the offense [21st in pace] and maintaining the well-established defense [five straight seasons in the top 10]. But the Bulls have an effective age of 30.1 [sixth oldest], so Hoiberg doesn't have the luxury of time. —B.D.



PROJECTED LINEUP PG Derrick Rose, SG Jimmy Butler, SF Mike Dunleavy, PF Joakim Noah, C Pau Gasol

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 9th [436 sq. ft. of above-average offense]

KYLE KORVER EFFECT The 35-year-old Dunleavy [87.6] is one of just three Bulls projected to be above average from 3 in '15-16.

PROJECTED WINS

VEGAS	ESPN FORECAST
49.5	50

PROJECTED EFFICIENCY

Below average Above average

1 Gasol, showing his age [35], took more than 52% of his shots from 8 feet and in last season but hit just 54.2% of them, a below-average rate.

2 Though the Bulls project at just 34.6% from 3 [18th], Butler is an assassin from the left corner, where he hits almost 55%.

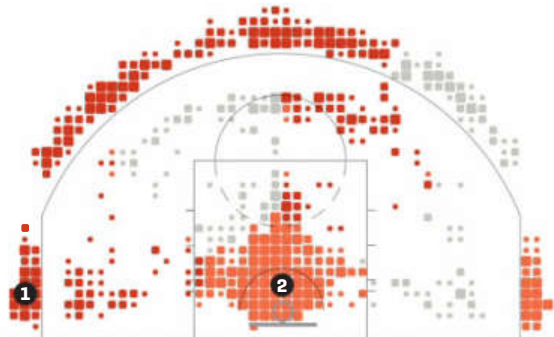


Jimmy Butler

3 HAWKS

LAST SEASON 60-22

Fresh off a franchise-best 60 wins, the Hawks lost SF DeMarre Carroll [39.5 percent from 3]. Replacing his perimeter skills on both ends won't be easy. No East team moved the ball and spaced the floor better than the Hawks [tops in the East in 3PT% and total assists]. New C Tiago Splitter, though a good fix for the team's rebounding woes [22nd in defensive, 30th in offensive], has neither range nor passing skills. —TOM HABERSTROH



PROJECTED LINEUP PG Jeff Teague, SG Thabo Sefolosha, SF Kyle Korver, PF Paul Millsap, C Al Horford

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 14th [426 sq. ft. of above-average offense]

KYLE KORVER EFFECT Korver [98.8] had a true shooting % of 69.9% last season, tops among non-centers in NBA history.

PROJECTED WINS

VEGAS	ESPN FORECAST
49.5	50

PROJECTED EFFICIENCY

Below average Above average

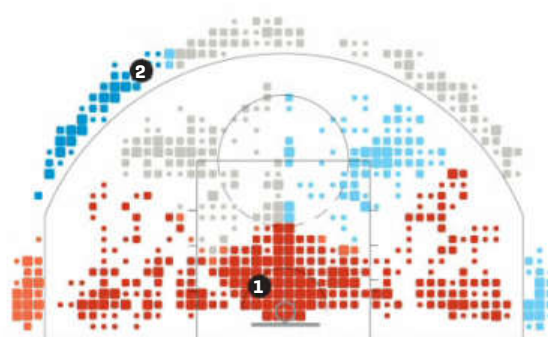
1 Korver led the NBA in 3PT% [49.2] and hit on an absurd 57% from the right corner last season. That he projects to hit just 48% this season is quite a drop.

2 With Korver as sniper, the trio of Teague, Millsap and Horford shot a solid 61% from inside 5 feet.

4 HEAT

LAST SEASON 37-45

This starry starting lineup, which remarkably didn't play a single minute together in '14-15 due to myriad injuries, returns with explosive potential [projected sixth-ranked offense]. If coach Erik Spoelstra improves his 19th-ranked D [82 games of Hassan Whiteside, whose elite 97 defensive rating topped all centers last season, should help], a return to the Eastern Conference finals is possible. —T.H.



PROJECTED LINEUP PG Goran Dragic, SG Dwyane Wade, SF Luol Deng, PF Chris Bosh, C Hassan Whiteside

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 4th [468 sq. ft. of above-average offense]

KYLE KORVER EFFECT Gerald Green [88.2] does more than leap! His 36% on 3s helps an outside game that was 24th in '14-15.

PROJECTED WINS

VEGAS	ESPN FORECAST
45.5	47

PROJECTED EFFICIENCY

Below average Above average

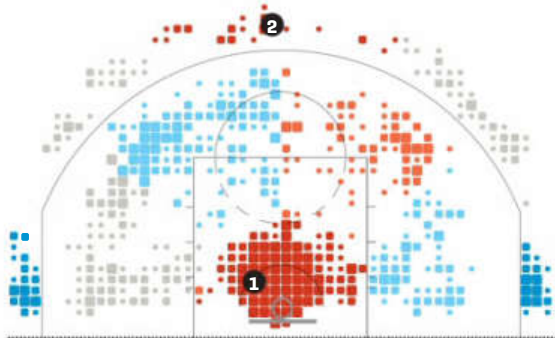
1 The Heat have four starters who eclipse 60% from inside 5 feet—including Whiteside, who posts a LeBron-like 71%.

2 Their perimeter game tells a different story. Not a single Heat starter projects to be above NBA average from beyond the arc in 2015-16.

5 WIZARDS

LAST SEASON 46-36

In response to a second straight Eastern semis loss, the Wizards added fan favorite Jared Dudley. Indeed, success will hinge on internal development, but this team rides a conventional framework—having bigs Nene and Marcin Gortat clog the middle—that stunts its growth. The big question: Was the 3-point barrage in the playoffs [9.4 per game, versus 6.1 during the season] an aberration or a sea change? —T.H.

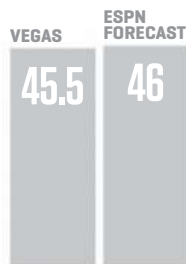


PROJECTED LINEUP PG John Wall, SG Bradley Beal, SF Otto Porter, PF Nene, C Marcin Gortat

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 11th [435 sq. ft. of above-average offense]

KYLE KORVER EFFECT Kevin Pelton's SCHOENE system projects Beal [88.5] to hit a career high 41% from 3 this season.

PROJECTED WINS



PROJECTED EFFICIENCY



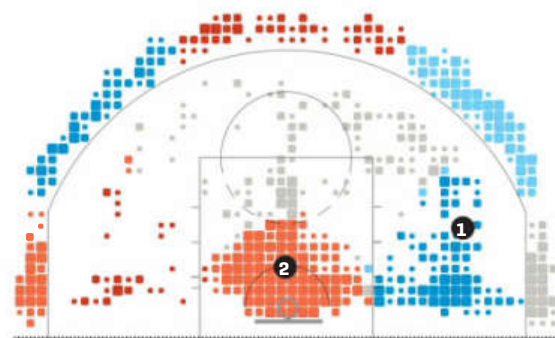
1 The speedy Wall and burly Gortat combined to hit an elite 66% of their shots in the paint last season.

2 Beal rarely ventures inside, attempting more than 60% of his shots from outside 15 feet. For good reason: He is deadly on above-the-break 3s [43%].

6 RAPTORS

LAST SEASON 49-33

After two straight first-round losses, Toronto looks to be past its peak. The acquisitions of DeMarre Carroll and backup PG Cory Joseph don't address the team's two biggest issues from '14-15: interior D [50.1 percent allowed on 2s last season, 28th in the NBA] and shooting [Toronto projects to have the NBA's 15th-best eFG%]. If the Raptors were in the West, we'd be punching their lottery ticket. —AMIN ELHASSAN

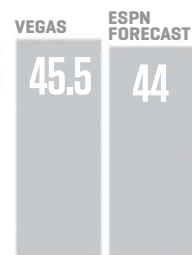


PROJECTED LINEUP PG Kyle Lowry, SG DeMar DeRozan, SF DeMarre Carroll, PF Patrick Patterson, C Jonas Valanciunas

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 6th [450 sq. ft. of above-average offense]

KYLE KORVER EFFECT Whatever Terrence Ross [88.6] provides on offense is nullified by his ineptitude on D [-3.6 defensive RPM].

PROJECTED WINS



PROJECTED EFFICIENCY



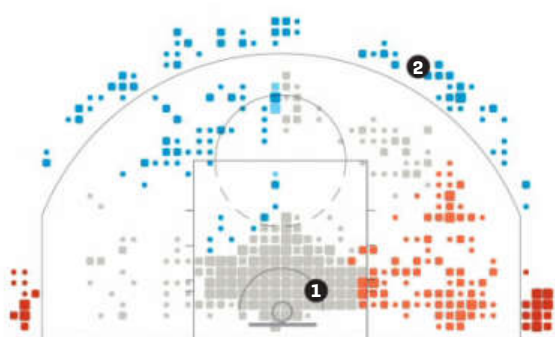
1 DeRozan flung 319 shots from 15 to 19 feet last season, where he shot 34%. The left baseline: 31%. From 3? Let's ... not [28.4%]. There's inefficient, and then there's DeRozan.

2 J-Val doesn't stray too far from home: 90% of his shots are at the rim, where he shoots nearly 60%.

7 BUCKS

LAST SEASON 41-41

Milwaukee's shocking 26-game jump last season was driven by the trio of Michael Carter-Williams, Khris Middleton and Giannis Antetokounmpo, whose length let the Bucks employ a hyperaggressive D that produced the highest forced-turnover rate of the past three seasons. The next step? The offense [projected 24th]. The Bucks were seventh in assist rate but need to cut down on their 29th-ranked turnover rate. —B.D.

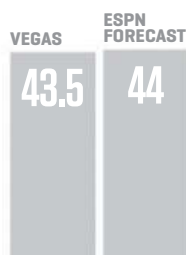


PROJECTED LINEUP PG Michael Carter-Williams, SG Khris Middleton, SF Giannis Antetokounmpo, PF Jabari Parker, C Greg Monroe

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 26th [366 sq. ft. of above-average offense]

KYLE KORVER EFFECT The Bucks' spacing isn't especially dynamic, but O.J. Mayo [81.4] crushes from the right corner [53.8%].

PROJECTED WINS



PROJECTED EFFICIENCY



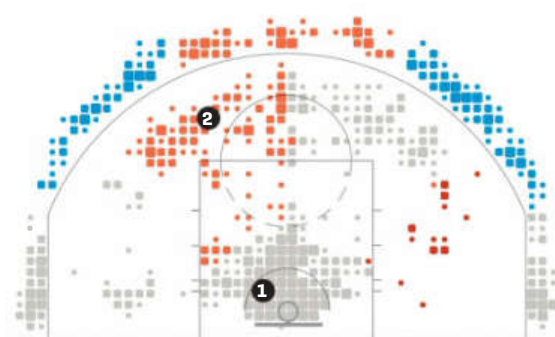
1 Monroe's aptitude in the paint [54.7% on 8.7 shots a game] serves as a boost for an O that ranked 22nd in FG% inside 5 feet.

2 Antetokounmpo and Carter-Williams are young, long and ... can't shoot. The duo project to a dreadful 30.5% from deep this season.

8 CELTICS

LAST SEASON 40-42

The glass-half-empty folks groan that Boston still doesn't have a star to build around while Danny Ainge's chest of draft picks collects dust. But boy genius Brad Stevens is cooking up something interesting: Boston's players 6-9 or taller made 208 3s last season [sixth], and the sneaky-good adds of real plus-minus darling Amir Johnson [projected 3.9] and former 20-and-10 man David Lee make the Celts sleepers in the East. —T.H.

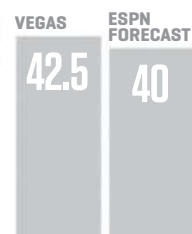


PROJECTED LINEUP PG Marcus Smart, SG Avery Bradley, SF Evan Turner, PF David Lee, C Amir Johnson

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 21st [400 sq. ft. of above-average offense]

KYLE KORVER EFFECT Isaiah Thomas [89.2] is Boston's worst defender [-2 defensive RPM] but shoots 35.8% from 3. Wash!

PROJECTED WINS



PROJECTED EFFICIENCY



1 The C's scored 41.8 paint ppg [16th] on 54.6% [15th]. Johnson [60.7% from 10 feet and in] provides the inside presence missing for years.

2 Bradley and Turner? Not so good with the 3s [projected 33.8%]. But they drain a combined 45.4% a few steps in.

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PROJECTED WINS

PROJECTED LINEUP

9 PACERS

LAST SEASON 38-44

VEGAS

42.5

ESPN FORECAST

39

PG George Hill
SG Monta Ellis
SF C.J. Miles
PF Paul George
C Ian Mahinmi

Credit the Pacers for trying. As Indiana aims for its own pace-and-space style (gone is the plodding frontcourt once owned by Roy Hibbert and David West), it's uncertain whether the team has the shooters to make it work. George [SCHOENE: 18.7 ppg, 6.9 rpg, 3.5 apg] is the only member of the rotation projected to finish in the 75th percentile or better in 3PT%. Dust off Larry Legend! —B.D.

10 HORNETS

LAST SEASON 33-49

VEGAS

32.5

ESPN FORECAST

35

PG Kemba Walker
SG Nicolas Batum
SF Marvin Williams
PF Cody Zeller
C Al Jefferson

The good news: A renovated roster featuring Batum, PG Jeremy Lin and rookie C Frank Kaminsky—all three project to at least 11 points per 36 minutes—should give punch to an offense that ranked 28th and shot an NBA-worst 31.8 percent from 3 in '14-15. The (really) bad news: Michael Kidd-Gilchrist's injury drops a stifling D once projected 10th best all the way to 20th. —T.H.

11 PISTONS

LAST SEASON 32-50

VEGAS

33.5

ESPN FORECAST

35

PG Reggie Jackson
SG Kentavious Caldwell-Pope
SF Marcus Morris
PF Ersan Ilyasova
C Andre Drummond

Stan's grand plan begins. Out are non-shooting cloggers Josh Smith and Greg Monroe. In are stretch 4s Ilyasova and Morris (a Ryan Anderson, if you will). Oh, and that Drummond guy (projected 14.1/13.4)? Kinda Dwight-like! Though SCHOENE predicts this season's D to be 17th and its 3-point shooting tied for 27th, the Stan Van Gundy blueprint is well in place. —B.D.

12 NETS

LAST SEASON 38-44

VEGAS

28.5

ESPN FORECAST

30

PG Jarrett Jack
SG Joe Johnson
SF Bojan Bogdanovic
PF Thaddeus Young
C Brook Lopez

Two years ago, Brooklyn traded three future first-round picks to field an All-Star lineup that won ... one series. Tepid talent remains, and coach Lionel Hollins' approach is, um, retro, to say the least. The Nets project as the NBA's third-worst offense; last season they were 25th in assist percentage and 28th in total passes per game. Brooklyn's future, just like its offense, is ugly. —B.D.

13 MAGIC

LAST SEASON 25-57

VEGAS

32.5

ESPN FORECAST

30

PG Elfrid Payton
SG Victor Oladipo
SF Tobias Harris
PF Aaron Gordon
C Nikola Vucevic

Last season's offense (27th) won't bounce back unless Oladipo (projected 34 percent from 3) can find a reliable stroke next to Payton, who hit just 11 total 3s. Magic coach Scott Skiles is notoriously tough on rookies, so to no one's surprise, walking highlight Mario Hezonja projects to see just 12 mpg. Skiles will help this 24th-ranked D, but another season in the cellar is in order. —T.H.

14 KNICKS

LAST SEASON 17-65

VEGAS

31.5

ESPN FORECAST

25

PG Jose Calderon
SG Arron Afflalo
SF Carmelo Anthony
PF Derrick Williams
C Robin Lopez

Uh, it's not going so well for Phil's Knicks. In a franchise-worst season, New York ranked 28th in D and 29th in O. And that's no typo. Free agents Afflalo (projected 35.2 percent from 3) and Lopez (team-high 2.6 defensive RPM) will help, and Melo projects to return to his usual self (23.7/7.3/ 2.8). But with limited scoring elsewhere and no first-rounder in 2016, Phil's triangle is more Bermuda than Chicago. —B.D.

15 76ERS

LAST SEASON 18-64

VEGAS

21.5

ESPN FORECAST

19

PG Isaiah Canaan
SG Nik Stauskas
SF Robert Covington
PF Nerlens Noel
C Jahlil Okafor

Trust the process! Philly ranked 13th on defense last season behind DPOY contender Noel, whose 4.2 defensive win shares as a rookie was the best since 1998. Now the hope is for rookie Okafor (projected 15.3/10.0 per 36 minutes) to make a similar impact on offense. More good news: Head coach Brett Brown, formerly of the Spurs, has some experience with twin towers. —B.D.

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WEST

1 WARRIORS

LAST SEASON 67-15

GRANTLAND

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How to top a franchise-best 67 wins and the first title in 40 years? Well, returning the top nine players in minutes played certainly helps, and the Warriors should land in the top 10 in offensive and defensive efficiency for the second straight season. But there's a reason they project to seven fewer W's: SCHOENE predicts the Spurs, Clippers and Rockets will have top-10 defenses. It also predicts a drop in the Warriors' effective FG% [an NBA-high 54 percent last year] and declines in ppg and 3PT% for Stephen Curry and Klay Thompson. They'll still be great—but great might not be good enough. —A.E.

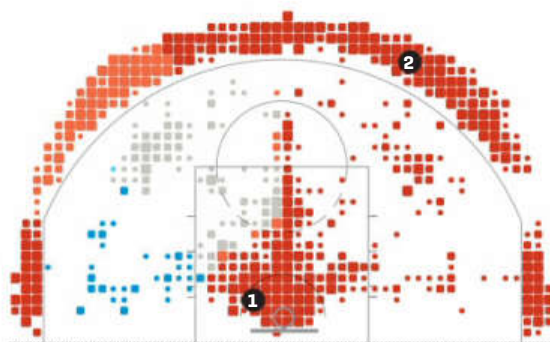
PROJECTED WINS

LAS VEGAS

60.5

ESPN FORECAST

60



PROJECTED LINEUP PG Stephen Curry, SG Klay Thompson, SF Harrison Barnes, PF Draymond Green, C Andrew Bogut

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 5th [461 sq. ft. of above-average offense]

KYLE KORVER EFFECT Curry, whose 96.3 KKE is second only to Korver himself, has the NBA record for 3s through six seasons.

PROJECTED EFFICIENCY

Below average Above average

1 Curry, the original Splash Brother and the NBA's most lethal shooter, is also the team's best interior threat. The guard led Golden State in paint ppg last season with 6.3.

2 Thompson, the other Splash Brother, projects to shoot 42.7% from 3, the league's fourth-best rate.

METHODOLOGY

Projected wins From Westgate Las Vegas SuperBook and ESPN's NBA Forecast panel.
Heat maps Using shot data from 2014-15 and projected starters, Grantland's Kirk Goldsberry ranks each team's offensive efficiency based on square footage.
Kyle Korver Effect To identify players who expand offenses the most, ESPN Stats & Information created a metric on a 1-100 scale, factoring in 3PT%, 3-point attempt rate [percentage of total shots that come from 3-point range] and influence on teammate FG%.

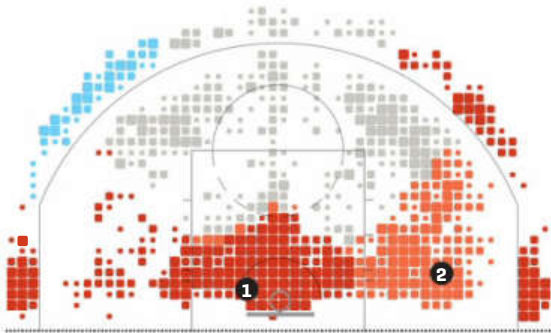
LIFE
HAPPENS
IN



2 SPURS

LAST SEASON 55-27

Even when the Spurs lose, they win. After a first-round exit from the playoffs, they landed free agent PF LaMarcus Aldridge, the NBA's most active midrange shooter. Yes, it's a decidedly anti-Spurs skill, but he drops a solid 41 percent from there, giving space to an offense RPM predicts to score 107.2 points per 100 possessions [fifth best]. After five titles and 18 straight playoff appearances, this could be the Spurs' best roster. —KEVIN PELTON

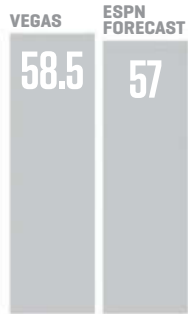


PROJECTED LINEUP PG Tony Parker, SG Danny Green, SF Kawhi Leonard, PF LaMarcus Aldridge, C Tim Duncan

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 2nd [506 sq. ft. of above-average offense]

KYLE KORVER EFFECT Among players with 1,000-plus attempts through six seasons, Green [93.7] is fourth in 3PT% [42%].

PROJECTED WINS

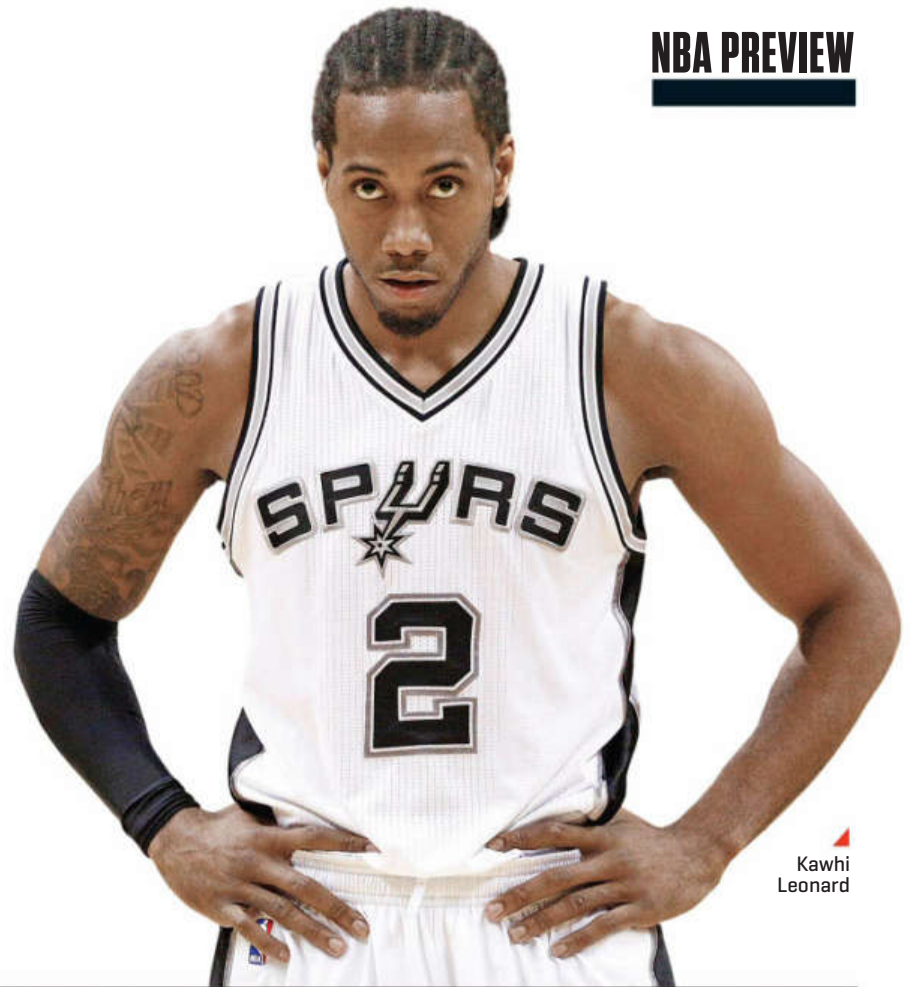


PROJECTED EFFICIENCY



1 Duncan hit 64.9% within 5 feet last year—higher than his average in his consecutive MVP seasons [64.8% in '01-'02 and '02-'03].

2 Aldridge loves the left-side baseline midrange J; the ex-Blazer hit more long 2s last season [327] than the Rockets did as a team [243].

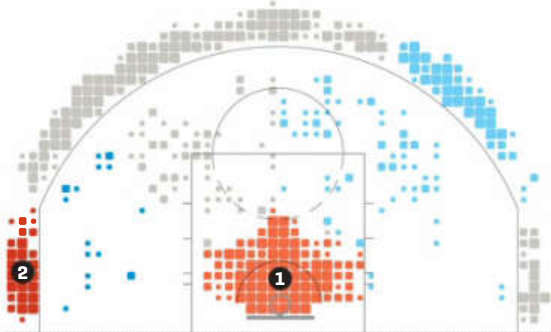


Kawhi Leonard

3 ROCKETS

LAST SEASON 56-26

Threes and drives: The Rockets' recipe for success. But what they *really* need is the healthy Dwight Howard who dominated in the playoffs [16.4 ppg, 14.0 rpg, 2.3 bpg]. Because while Houston attempted the most 3-pointers in the NBA the past two seasons, it shot worse than league average both years [35.8 and 34.8 percent, respectively]. Improvement in those areas will determine whether it truly belongs in the West's top tier. —K.P.

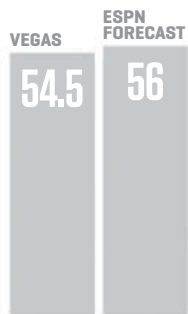


PROJECTED LINEUP PG Ty Lawson, SG James Harden, SF Trevor Ariza, PF Terrence Jones, C Dwight Howard

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 24th [381 sq. ft. of above-average offense]

KYLE KORVER EFFECT Harden, the team's best spacer [87.6], also projects to be the league's top scorer [24.9 ppg].

PROJECTED WINS



PROJECTED EFFICIENCY



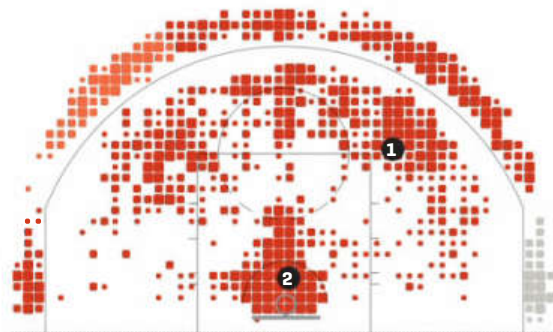
1 Inside: Howard [second in paint ppg at 12.1] and Harden [seventh among guards, 8.3] force defenses to collapse at the rim.

2 Outside: Ariza and Harden shot 1,110 3s last season. The Wolves: 1,223 as a team. One team made the Western Conference finals. One team ... did not.

4 CLIPPERS

LAST SEASON 56-26

The Clippers' biggest downfall was being forced to give big minutes to the likes of Austin Rivers [10.3 PER] and Glen Davis [10.8]. *Guh.* The talented Lance Stephenson and veteran Paul Pierce, both plus defenders [projected +0.8 and +1.3 defensive RPM, respectively], will help a unit that ranked just 15th last season. But with a roster with an average effective age of 30.3 [NBA's fourth oldest], time is increasingly of the essence. —A.E.



PROJECTED LINEUP PG Chris Paul, SG J.J. Redick, SF Paul Pierce, PF Blake Griffin, C DeAndre Jordan

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 1st [562 sq. ft. of above-average offense]

KYLE KORVER EFFECT Redick [94.2] projects to 61.2% true shooting [accounting for 2s and 3s], No. 2 among all guards.

PROJECTED WINS



PROJECTED EFFICIENCY



1 If your team insists on the efficacy of the long 2, CP3 is a great guy to have; he shot an überefficient 51.1% from 10 to 19 feet.

2 Thanks to the dominant duo of Jordan and Griffin inside, the Clippers topped the NBA in FG% from inside 5 feet [63%].

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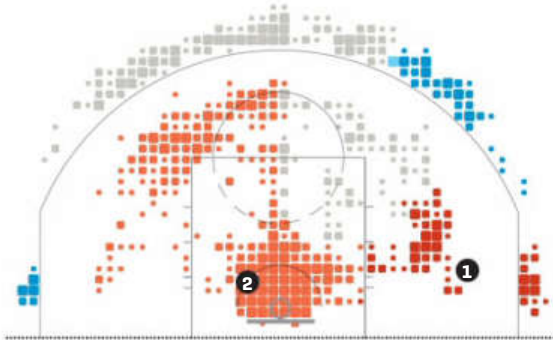
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5 THUNDER

LAST SEASON 45-37

The Thunder's biggest task this season? Convincing Kevin Durant that he can win in OKC. Sure, Durant (projected 24.4/6.7/4.4) and Russell Westbrook form the top duo in projected WARP this season (combined 31.6), but we've heard that before. It's the supporting cast that's never been quite good enough. And signing RPM laggard Enes Kanter (340th last season) won't move the needle. It's do-or-die time in OKC. —K.P.

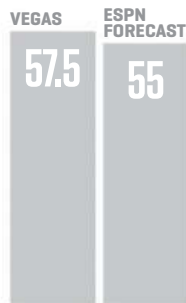


PROJECTED LINEUP PG Russell Westbrook, SG Andre Roberson, SF Kevin Durant, PF Serge Ibaka, C Steven Adams

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 23rd (384 sq. ft. of above-average offense)

KYLE KORVER EFFECT Anthony Morrow (73.7) is their best outside threat (42.4%), but his lack of minutes limits his impact.

PROJECTED WINS



PROJECTED EFFICIENCY



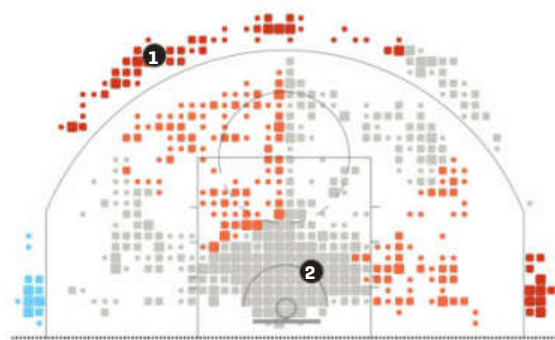
1 Ibaka is one of the NBA's best from the left side, shooting 50% from the baseline and 60% from the corner 3 last season.

2 One of the NBA's best interior threats? Westbrook: 11.3 ppg in the paint, the only guard in the top 10.

6 GRIZZLIES

LAST SEASON 55-27

In a league that's gone perimeter, the Grizzlies pound it inside. Memphis led the league with 47.1 paint points per game and projects to make the second-fewest 3s. And with the NBA's oldest roster at an average effective age of 31.5, how long, oh lord, can the Grizz survive on grit 'n' grind? Even with underrated acquisitions Matt Barnes and Brandan Wright (combined 12.4 ppg/6.9 rpg), this team is on the decline. —K.P.



PROJECTED LINEUP PG Mike Conley, SG Courtney Lee, SF Tony Allen, PF Zach Randolph, C Marc Gasol

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 7th (448 sq. ft. of above-average offense)

KYLE KORVER EFFECT Even with Lee (85.9), the Grizz project to hit just 33.7% of their 3s, 27th in the NBA.

PROJECTED WINS



PROJECTED EFFICIENCY



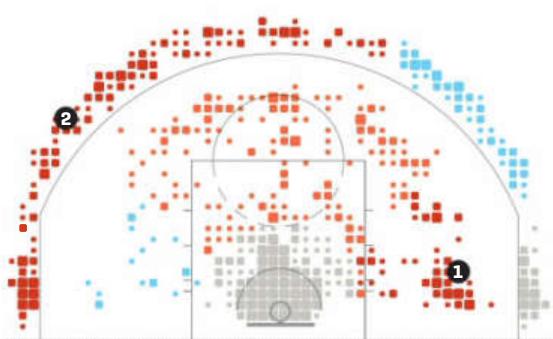
1 We're not asking for more 3s from Allen, but Conley and Lee are two of just nine players to hit at least 38% of 3s with fewer than 300 attempts in '14-15.

2 Memphis' 50 shot attempts per game from the paint led the NBA. Problem: It converted 51.8%, 17th best in the league.

7 PELICANS

LAST SEASON 45-37

Two-way superstar Anthony Davis, impossibly only 22, led the NBA in PER (30.9) and blocks (2.9) last season and has improved in basically every statistical category over his first three years. How will the Pels continue their rise? Simple: Get AD the ball more. To do that, new coach Alvin Gentry needs to up his team's 27th-ranked pace of play (93.7 possessions per game), giving Davis more looks to work his unbelievably efficient game. —K.P.

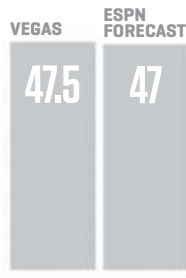


PROJECTED LINEUP PG Jrue Holiday, SG Eric Gordon, SF Quincy Pondexter, PF Anthony Davis, C Omer Asik

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 15th (424 sq. ft. of above-average offense)

KYLE KORVER EFFECT Gordon (88.8) shot a career-high 44.8% from 3 last season, but SCHOENE projects a decline to 40.9%.

PROJECTED WINS



PROJECTED EFFICIENCY



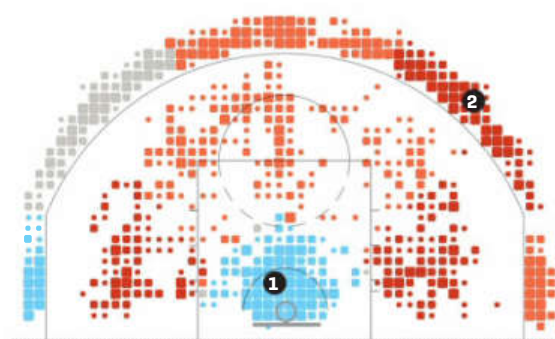
1 Davis was 29% on shots from 15 to 19 feet as a rookie in 2012-13. Last season: 42%. And he's improving his 3-point range.

2 The Pels project to shoot 36.7% from 3, tied for sixth best in the NBA, led by Gordon and Pondexter, who combined to hit 44% last season.

8 MAVS

LAST SEASON 50-32

Despite failing to sign DeAndre Jordan, the Mavericks look surprisingly decent. Deron Williams (16th point guard in RPM) and Wesley Matthews (seventh among shooting guards) both rate well, but health will be a big determining factor this season. Matthews and Chandler Parsons are coming off surgeries, and old reliable Dirk Nowitzki is 37. Fit or not, this is a playoff-contending team. But nothing more. And perhaps less. —K.P.

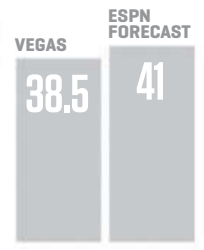


PROJECTED LINEUP PG Deron Williams, SG Wesley Matthews, SF Chandler Parsons, PF Dirk Nowitzki, C Zaza Pachulia

ALL ABOUT THAT SPACE 3rd (490 sq. ft. of above-average offense)

KYLE KORVER EFFECT Parsons (85.3) and Matthews lead the perimeter attack (projected 36.7%, tied for sixth in the NBA).

PROJECTED WINS



PROJECTED EFFICIENCY



1 Pachulia shot 49% from inside 8 feet last season. Almost-Maverick DeAndre Jordan hit on 71% from that distance.

2 Nowitzki is still among the best stretch 4s in the game, leading the NBA in 3PT% (39%) among players 6-10 and taller over the past two seasons.



Stunning new coupe or powerful SUV? Yes.

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PROJECTED WINS

PROJECTED LINEUP

9 JAZZ

LAST SEASON 38-44

VEGAS

40.5

ESPN FORECAST

40

PG Trey Burke
SG Alec Burks
SF Gordon Hayward
PF Derrick Favors
C Rudy Gobert

This is the NBA's third-youngest team [24.9], and even without second-year PG Dante Exum, out with a torn ACL, SCHOENE projects the Jazz to finish in the top half in defense and offense. After the All-Star break last season, a giant frontcourt featuring 6-10 Favors and 7-1 Gobert led Utah to a 19-10 record and the NBA's best D. Behold! Your sleeper team in the West. —K.P.

10 SUNS

LAST SEASON 39-43

VEGAS

36.5

ESPN FORECAST

35

PG Brandon Knight
SG Eric Bledsoe
SF P.J. Tucker
PF Markieff Morris
C Tyson Chandler

Talk about best-laid plans. In their attempt to lure LaMarcus Aldridge, the Suns signed Chandler to anchor a D that allowed 103.3 ppg [26th in the NBA] in '14-15. The issue is that Chandler finished 118th in opponent FG% at the rim. Of course, Aldridge signed with San Antonio, leaving the Suns where no team wants to be: not good enough to contend but not bad enough to rebuild. —A.E.

11 BLAZERS

LAST SEASON 51-31

VEGAS

26.5

ESPN FORECAST

31

PG Damian Lillard
SG C.J. McCollum
SF Al-Farouq Aminu
PF Meyers Leonard
C Mason Plumlee

Portland is rebuilding after losing four starters this summer. Thankfully, the hardest part, finding a cornerstone, is done. Lillard, 25, projects to have the fifth-best WARP among point guards this season [11.3]. And the Trail Blazers should have \$32M to spend next offseason. A rebuild is tough to take after a 51-win season, but at least Portland is positioned to make it a short one. —K.P.

12 KINGS

LAST SEASON 29-53

VEGAS

30.5

ESPN FORECAST

31

PG Rajon Rondo
SG Ben McLemore
SF Rudy Gay
PF DeMarcus Cousins
C Kosta Koufos

In owner Vivek Ranadive's world, Sacramento, a team that hasn't eclipsed 30 wins since 2007-08, is ready now. In this world, new PG Rondo [projected RPM of -4.7], SG Marco Belinelli and SF Caron Butler propel this team to the West's upper echelon. The reality? This season's team is only marginally better—typical theater for the NBA's most dysfunctional franchise. —A.E.

13 NUGGETS

LAST SEASON 30-52

VEGAS

26.5

ESPN FORECAST

27

PG Emmanuel Mudiay
SG Wilson Chandler
SF Danilo Gallinari
PF Kenneth Faried
C Jusuf Nurkic

The trade of PG Ty Lawson signaled the merciful end of Denver's long stay in NBA purgatory [nine first-round exits in 12 years]. Oh, it'll get ugly—a projected 29th-ranked offense and 24th-ranked D—but young talent remains, and help is on the way. Nurkic [projected 15.2/12.1 per 36 minutes], 21, and No. 7 pick Mudiay await as many as four first-round picks in 2016. —K.P.

14 LAKERS

LAST SEASON 21-61

VEGAS

29.5

ESPN FORECAST

26

PG D'Angelo Russell
SG Jordan Clarkson
SF Kobe Bryant
PF Julius Randle
C Roy Hibbert

Give the Lakers *some* credit: Trading for Hibbert [42.6 percent opponent FG% at the rim] will help their 29th-ranked D; Russell's statistical rookie-year comp is Kyrie Irving; and a healthy Randle looks like their power forward of the future. Good news for the looming post-Kobe era, right? Not so much. The Lakers have improved just enough to send their 2016 top-three-protected pick to Philly. —A.E.

15 WOLVES

LAST SEASON 16-66

VEGAS

25.5

ESPN FORECAST

24

PG Ricky Rubio
SG Kevin Martin
SF Andrew Wiggins
PF Karl-Anthony Towns
C Kevin Garnett

Minnesota has two cornerstones in ROY Wiggins and 2015 No. 1 pick Towns. Now, if the Timberwolves just didn't have so many bricks. They shot just 46.1 percent on 2s and 33.2 percent on 3s while taking an NBA-low 17.9 percent of shots from beyond the arc. This season they project to make the fewest 3s again. As is often the case with this franchise, the offense looks stone cold. —K.P.

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STEP
PROJECT



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THE GREAT PRETENDER

Brandon Armstrong has blazed an entirely new path to hoops glory by parodying the NBA's finest. But now that he has achieved viral fame, what's next?

BY KENT RUSSELL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHIAS CLAMER



1,265,376

Russell Westbrook videos are Internet gold for Armstrong. His impersonation of the OKC point guard has garnered more than 1 million total views.

NBA PREVIEW

IT DOES SOUND like the setup to a joke: Young NBA never-was walks into Atlanta's swankiest mall, buys up all the shoes his entourage can carry. "Hey ... Jeremy!" Brandon Armstrong calls across the store to his friend, roommate and manager. He holds up two size 14 boots, a slate gray and a blue suede. "C'mon, bruh," Jeremy Halbert-Harris answers, bulging his eyes, grimacing and twisting his head clockwise, as if to implore his client to hurry up and arrive at the obvious choice. "Where's my Future hat, though?" Armstrong asks. "Boy," Jeremy says. "The only way you gonna stop wanting a Future hat is when people online tell you how stupid you look in a Future hat."

Armstrong, a guard out of nearby Chamblee, involves all 6 feet, 1 inch of himself in clucking his tongue, slapping at nothing, dismissing his manager. Then he settles back down so the clerk can attend to his feet. Seated, he's more restive than restful, exuding the skittish potentiality of a schoolboy on Friday; it's the kind of barely contained vigor that awaits the introduction of a ball, some rules, the starting shot—anything. This inborn athleticism helped land Armstrong a scholarship at Lincoln Memorial University, where he led the woeful D2 Railsplitters to a No. 1 national ranking. After college, it took his pro career from the D-League to Spain and Australia. As recently as July, Armstrong, 25, was scheduled to participate in EuroBasket's summer league. The \$425 fee had even been waived for him. But he skipped his flight. He decided he'd rather make a new comedy video.

Armstrong's childhood best friend, Royal Lee Reed III, returns to the Aldo store, bags in hand. Although the two of them played on the same middle school team back in the day, Royal has since thickened into the sort of man who, when rebounding, rebounds. "I never been this hungover before," Royal tells me, then yawns. "I should've stuck to my Hennessy. Dude had me drinking champagne in the club last night."

The crew was out late celebrating the success of another viral video—Armstrong parodying the play of Spurs star Manu Ginobili. Perhaps you saw it. Perhaps because you're one of Armstrong's million-plus social media followers, or perhaps because your feeds were cluttered with links to sites that had

embedded his video. In any case, Ginobili watched it. He tweeted a nine-emoji hieroglyph in response, adding, "Great job man! Loved it!"

It was one of Armstrong's least favorite videos so far, truth be told. He didn't think it particularly funny. And, as if to corroborate this, it was doing nowhere near the numbers of his Kobe Bryant parody (33,000 retweets) or his Russell Westbrook vid (21,000 retweets), the first

of his uploads to go viral. It was hilarious, the way he captured Westbrook's righteous indignation at not getting properly dapped up after every basket. Armstrong shot that video two months ago, when he decided to give up on the hoop dreamer's usual path and focus instead on his social media career. If this too sounds like the setup to a joke, consider that Web celebrity PewDiePie, a 20-something Swede who films himself playing video





8.7K

Twitter followers
on June 1

78.7K

Twitter followers
on Aug. 1

131.6K

Twitter followers
on Oct. 1

NO ONE IS SAFE

Armstrong spent the summer imitating much of the NBA [even a ref!], and Twitter nation responded, following @BdotAdot5 en masse.

games, reportedly pulled in \$7.4 million from advertising and sponsorships last year. PewDiePie's homemade music video for his pug dog drew more eyeballs than every single game of the NBA Finals.

Armstrong and Jeremy approach the counter with their intended purchases. Jeremy played wide receiver at Morehouse, yet next to Armstrong he looks decidedly earthbound. "Bruh," Jeremy says while the two of them are

being rung up, before hoisting his phone above his head, tilting its front-facing camera downward—the Vine-ing posture—and ad-libbing a funny dance to the store's Euro disco. Armstrong looks up from his wallet, sees what's happening and immediately mirrors Jeremy's moves, the rhythm passing into his body as if he'd just grabbed a violently shaking pole. It is uncanny.

This is what's most striking about

Armstrong's parody videos: He isn't throwing on wigs and parroting speech patterns, like a Darrell Hammond or a Kenan Thompson. Instead, he is using his preternatural gracefulness to inhabit the mechanics and kinesthetic tics of his subjects. You look at Armstrong on video and you see a hyperactive facsimile of Tim Duncan, or James Harden, or Paul Pierce—whomever he's decided to appropriate. He's been cracking up teammates with this capability since he seriously picked up basketball, untutored, in his early teens. "I can just do it," he tells me. "I don't even really have to think about it."

In the food court, we place orders for cheesesteaks. A girl in an oversize Jim Thome throwback squints at us before recognizing Armstrong and discreetly periscoping her phone. "The crazy thing about it," Royal leans over to tell me, "is he's been doing videos like this for years." Since middle school at least, when the two of them would freestyle goofily into the small webcam on Armstrong's old Dell. "You know, his whole dream was he just wanted to play basketball. Sometimes I even think, 'Shoot, this is better than him being in the NBA.' He don't gotta worry about no toll on his body. He opened up his own lane. No one's done this before."

Royal is right, I think. What Armstrong is trying to do is flip a familiar script—the tragedy of the undrafted—by pioneering a new form of physical comedy: the failed-professional-athlete-turned-parodist.

As we eat, Armstrong puts his iPhone face up on the table but hides its screen with his wallet. Every so often he pulls the wallet down, slowly, to check the litany of new social media notifications sliding atop old ones, impacting them. "I still play basketball on the regular. Pickup games at Georgia Tech. Yep, yep, yep," he says. His accent is stretched with the taffied inflection of his hometown Atlanta burbs, a bit of a rasp to it when he raises his voice. "But I'm not going back overseas. I may go for the right price. But as of now, it's like, *nah*."

He tells me that he's received calls from the Pistons, Bucks and Celtics in the past few weeks. "I talked to Steve Kerr," Armstrong says. "They're gonna fly me out at the end of September to shoot videos with the team and also play with them. Shoot some funny



videos with Steph Curry and Draymond Green. I wouldn't mind being the 12th man on the bench. You can put me in the game, I'll knock some 3s down. Y'all up by 50, or we down by 50. That's fine."

On the way to the Nike Store, Vines are vined and tweets tweeted. Every couple hundred feet, the guys are compelled to hold their phones at arm's length, like compact mirrors, and document themselves cracking wise, whipping and/or nae-naeing, transmuting their punchy friendship into clicks and likes (and advertising dollars and potential sponsorships with, say, Dippin' Dots and ...). When you get down to it, social media use is basically an exercise in self-admiration based upon the admiration you think you're inspiring in others—but *damn* if it isn't fun to be around this entourage.

The Nike employees recognize Armstrong as soon as he walks through the door. "That Kobe one was funny as f---," a clerk says, and then he impersonates Armstrong's impersonation. "Holy s---, it *is* him," a dumpy young man in glasses says. "I pictured him being shorter—Hey! Brandon!" Armstrong is spinning a basketball on his index finger, guiding it between his legs, behind his back, all while Royal films. "Brandon!" the kid pleads. "Streetballers be like ...!" Right?!"

The kid is referring to Armstrong's other videos, the short slices of basketball life he uploads almost daily: "How the bench reacts when someone gets dunked on"; "That one hooper who REFUSES to use his left hand"; "When you hit the game winner you get so happy & forget you don't got no dad." Implicit in these titles is the phrase "be like," a combination of fact and simile, X be like Y. The text announces that the video will re-create some universal situation or sentiment—or some well-known public figure—and then take the essence of that to its absurd, parodic extreme.

This is the other secret of Armstrong's success: He understands that satire is a lesson but parody is a game. Parody is an intuitive,

"THIS IS BETTER THAN BEING IN THE NBA. NO ONE'S DONE THIS."

ROYAL LEE REED III ON HIS FRIEND BRANDON ARMSTRONG

entertaining form of criticism, shorthand for what "serious" critics write out at length. It comes from a place of intimate knowledge, if not always admiration. And it is necessarily playful, parody, because it is a game most often played by the disempowered. It's what underlings do when the boss's back is turned.

Armstrong sees the Nike employees putting out some headless mannequins and gets an idea. "Hey," he says to Royal, "record me talking—" then gestures to a headless mannequin placed on a bench. "I'm gonna be sitting next to him. But you not gon' get him, you feel me? So look. Pay attention, man! I'll be telling him, 'Look, Coach wants me to tell you you gotta get your head in the game. I know you got a good head on your shoulders.' Then you gon' pan like that." Royal does as instructed, stifling laughter.

"That's it right there," Armstrong says, checking the footage. "Though you panned in late as hell, Royal." He'll edit it later in iMovie and release it on a slow day. Something like, "That one teammate who ain't got no sense."

NOW WHAT? IT'S a question I keep asking Armstrong. He has reached the plateau of a certain kind of fame, has earned enough money to move into a two-bedroom apartment with Jeremy and buy some new kicks—"Would prefer not to put a dollar amount out there," he says, "but, yes, it is a very legit income"—but his success came when the nation was drifting through the summer sports doldrums. So ... *now what?*

"I'm just going with the flow right now, trying to stay buzzing," Armstrong says as we enter his Uncle Carlton's house, where he films. "There's really no long game."

What isn't exactly conveyed in his videos is that this house is a mansion—white columns, four-car garage, HVAC ducts in the baseboards, fluffy lapdog with pink bandanna named Gemini scurrying about—in the old-money part of Atlanta. Armstrong introduces me to his cousin Jared Maner, the guy D'ing him up in all of his videos. Jared is top-heavily muscular, a first-team all-conference outfielder at Morehouse. "I saw that Ginobili responded," Jared says, his voice affectless. "Some of my classmates were watching it on their laptops."

The three of us—Royal is here too, but he's off filming himself singing while skating in circles on one of those handle-less Segway things—huddle under the mansion's carport as fat gobs of sweet-smelling rain briefly fall. Armstrong and Jared lean into Armstrong's iPhone like guys trying to light a cigarette from the same Bic. They queue up Carmelo Anthony highlight reels on YouTube. "He follow through sometimes," Armstrong notices. "Yeah, midrange?" Jared asks. "It's like a follow-through pull," Armstrong says. "See how he pump-faking? Then I gotta do that dunk where he don't touch the rim. Yeah, I just push him off. All right. You ready?"

Is this all that passes for preproduction around here? "Well," Armstrong concedes. "I gotta study Melo a little bit more than usual because I had to see his antics. But it's 20 to 25 minutes each. Straight iPhone work."

"Recording," Royal announces.

"Hold it sideways, bruh!" Armstrong says. "Landscape mode! *Now* it's action!"

Dribbling onto his uncle's driveway, shooting at its comically short hoop, Armstrong transforms into suppleness and motion, a liquid shooter. It's a little eerie, the speed and effortlessness of this metamorphosis, as though I'm watching that shape-shifting police officer from *Terminator 2*, only this time the Terminator is deliquescing into the spiritual form of Carmelo Anthony, which is a gently quivering loaf of Jell-O. I reiterate: uncanny.

This verisimilitude is crucial; it grounds the jokes—in this instance how zealously Melo pump-fakes and how rarely he gives a crap on defense.

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NBA PREVIEW

Armstrong's parodies isolate these characteristics, re-create them faithfully before ratcheting up the absurdity. (His parody of James Harden, for instance, includes 30 seconds of Armstrong-cum-Harden seeking out contact while driving to the hoop, while swimming in a pool, while running across a roof—and ending with Armstrong/Harden locking arms with his defender and skipping away to strains of “Follow the Yellow Brick Road.”)

“All right, next scene,” Armstrong says. Uncle Carlton pokes his head out of the kitchen. He's never been home while his nephew is filming, but he knows about the videos and their success from his employees, who like to watch them instead of working. I ask him what he thinks about the fame. “I'm an old man,” he says, then shuts the door slowly while maintaining eye contact with me through its window.

After a few more scenes, it's a wrap—pitch-perfect parody in under half an hour. Everyone takes five, drawing phones to their faces like oxygen masks. Armstrong reads aloud from a new Vice Sports review of one of his videos, his cadence slowing when he reaches a part he likes because his words have to pass through his smile.

Royal shouts, “Car!” and we make way for the Range Rover of Armstrong's aunt. Then filming resumes. Armstrong has decided to inhabit Kevin Garnett next. He doesn't need YouTube this time; he grew up watching KG, admiring KG. So as is the case with any child who dreamed of *being like* an idol, Armstrong used to pretend he *was* KG, mirroring his movements and mannerisms as if perfect re-creation would one day call down upon Armstrong the same blessings. In the driveway, Armstrong is nailing KG in single takes.

He caps his parody by lampooning KG's pregame ritual of talking to himself under the basket. Armstrong presses his head against the stanchion, thinks for 10 seconds or so before he summons a hostage taker's erraticism, freestyling: “I don't want no lettuce on my got-dang sandwich. I don't want no mayonnaise on my burger. I don't want no burger, I don't want no mayonnaise, I like fries, no salt, sea salt *on my fries*, and make sure it's *wheat bread ... C'MON!*”

Royal stifles laughter; Jared says, “That's funny as *fuuuuh*, bruh. That's going to be a hit.”

I ask if—how—this is lucrative. “There's a lot of people that want to pay me to release content for their channels,” Armstrong answers. He starts juggling the basketball with his feet, occasionally hoofing in 2-pointers. “But I know how it is. I'm a marketing major. I like to think I'm smart enough to know what it is I provide.”

The humidity has swollen to where it's practically pinning our arms to our sides. We retreat into the manse. “I'm about to get a little contract to produce content,” Armstrong says, unscrewing the cap on a bottle of water. “Yes sir. You know LeBron—I'm waiting to see where I want to take my talents this fall.”

So this has all been one big audition reel? I ask. So that you can be like a studio-system star for one particular media outlet? Great, but—*then what?*

“I'm not going to get tired of doing this,” Armstrong says. “And anyway, I've had a couple people hit me up about hosting red-carpet events with athletes. Instead of someone from E!, they'll have me asking the athletes questions, loosening 'em up. Plus, we got sent a movie role the other day.”

He tells me he feels no dread about being the funny guy, about having to continually convert life into laughs. But I've been around Armstrong for only a few days and already I turn to him, grinning and wide-eyed, whenever he opens his mouth. That's what plagues funny guys, I think—the expectancy that chases them like a second shadow. Online, he has to cut up around the clock, monetize every passing thought, or else sink beneath the static.

“He gon' be in the MLB,” Armstrong says, pointing at his cousin. “And I'm gon' be on TV.” But then doubt momentarily clouds his face. “I just wanna be the top entertainer in the business. Whether that's on the court, off the court, on a movie screen. To be an NBA impersonator, that's cool. But I don't want to end up like Batting Stance Guy. You never hear about Batting Stance Guy no more.” His eyes release me from their focus, and they tick downward to his hands, where they are waving over his phone as if divining tonight's plans via crystal ball.

EVERY LABOR DAY weekend, Chris Bridges, aka Ludacris, hosts a slew of charity events around Atlanta, the crown jewel of which is a celebrity basketball game. Last night Armstrong was informed that he had been the final addition to the Team Luda roster. The opponent would be Team Chris Brown.

The crowd waiting outside the Georgia State University arena snakes around several avenue blocks downtown. Everyone appears to be very young, very good-looking and dressed so that one attribute or quirk is played up and made central, as with a superhero's costume. Inside, a DJ blasts ATL-centric bangers.

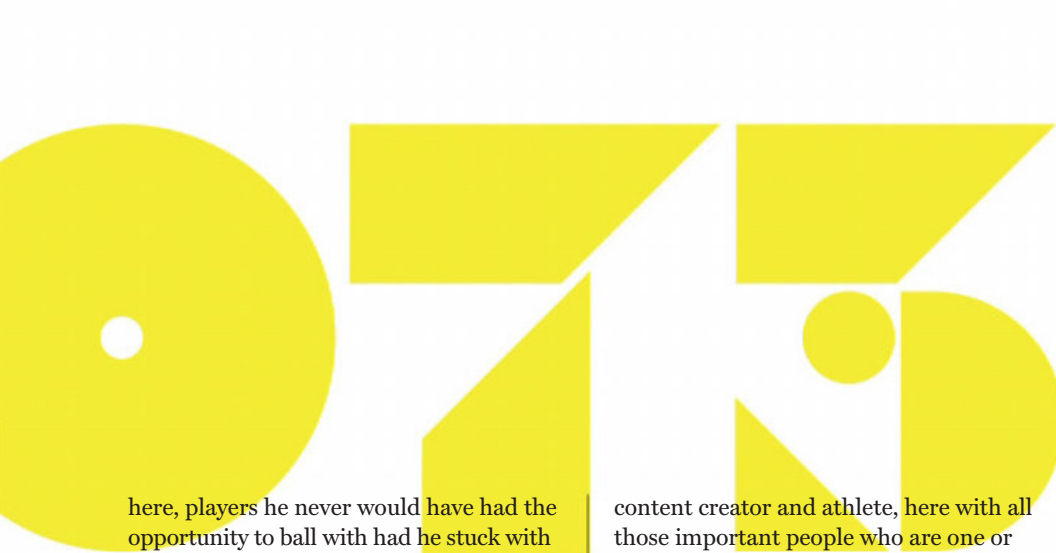
17,343,073

Well beyond 15 minutes of fame, Armstrong's top 16 impressions have found more than 17 million sets of eyeballs on YouTube.



The shallow grandstands rising away from the court are fairly empty up until 10 minutes after the scheduled tip-off time, whereupon they are packed. Armstrong emerges from a tunnel wearing No. 14. He sinks a few perfunctory 3s during warm-up, but mostly he's wandering the court with a lopsided smile on his face. This is less a celebrity affair than an NBA young stars contest: John Wall is here, as are Eric Bledsoe, Kenneth Faried, Victor Oladipo, Iman Shumpert, Nick Young and at least three other professionals I can't quite place. Armstrong gets relatively shrunk by these giants; his presence among them calls to mind that little silhouette they put next to textbook illustrations of dinosaurs, for scale.

A videographer prowling the court spots Armstrong and asks him to do a few impersonations. What's funny is he's already parodied some of the other players



here, players he never would have had the opportunity to ball with had he stuck with his minor league grind. Armstrong has, quite literally, faked it until he made it.

Still, I can't help but be struck by the sense that Armstrong is performing something akin to the role of court jester. His parodies criticize important people, make gentle sport of them, sure. But don't they also *ratify* these important people? Don't the parodies reaffirm their sense of themselves as people famous enough, important enough, *good enough* to be parodied? That *of course* some scrub has paid enough attention and taken the time to clown them? I'm thinking here about that dictum that all things happen twice—first as tragedy, then as farce.

The word *parody*, after all, comes from the same root as the word *parabola*, as well as the word *parasite*.

The game itself, like any all-star affair, is not worth describing. Chris Brown can, unfortunately, ball, and he never once subs himself out. Dej Loaf does not talk to one soul the entire time and is by far the coolest person in the building. Trinidad James takes off neither his sunglasses nor his dookie chain while playing. Mike Will and Big K.R.I.T. post courtside snapshots to their social media accounts, a far more effective form of legitimizing this event than anything the press photographers could provide. NBA players orchestrate a continuous dolphin show of alley-ooping, and I find myself growing bored with balletic transcendence.

Armstrong is not in the starting five. He's standing at the head of Team Luda's bench, intermittently making fun. He takes a few selfies with some players and fans. More important, he participates in the image-burnishing reciprocity that is this game's whole *raison d'être*: Musicians are letting their fans and followers know they are big enough deals to be sharing the court with NBA stars; NBA stars are doing likewise, giddily sharing photos of themselves with Migos and Omarion. For his part, Armstrong is happily among them, occupying the gray area between

content creator and athlete, here with all those important people who are one or the other, making or doing the things considered coolest at this moment in time.

He is finally subbed in with three minutes to go in the third quarter, Team Luda up by double digits. Armstrong immediately clanks a 3 off the buckle. When he tries to make a sneaky outlet pass, the ball hits its intended recipient in the elbow; the NBAer didn't expect the funny guy to be able to hoop. As the quarter dwindles, Chris Brown dribbles upcourt, slowing beyond the arc. He faces off, one-on-one, with Armstrong. The arena's DJ counts down from 10. Three, and Chris Brown tries to cross Armstrong over. Two, and he pulls up to shoot. One, and Armstrong gets way in his face but does not foul him, good hard defense all around. Chris Brown's shot misses badly. He calls for a foul but—*delicious*—does not get one. The horn sounds. Armstrong won't see any more playing time.

And then, before the start of the fourth quarter, the lights dim. A rumbling beat is played over the PA, and some social media child star—some post-TerRio whom I've since tried to look up but cannot locate, so deep in the Internet's thicket of arcana is he—this human catchphrase jumps up onto the scorer's table, wrenches loose the mic and starts screaming what sounds to me like: "I'M BANKROLL, I DO WHAT I WANT! I'M BANKROLL, I DO WHAT I WANT!" He is screaming it so hard, and with his lips so close to the microphone, that coherence is obliterated. I turn to ask anyone over 30 what is going on, but there's no one here over 30 except the cops, and the cops are all chanting "I'M BANKROLL, I DO WHAT I WANT!" while filming with their phones.

The celebrities gather round the kid, a perimeter of creative capital that contracts like a cold or titillated nipple. They too chant "I'M BANKROLL, I DO WHAT I WANT!" while filming. Then, just as quickly as they contracted, they disperse, the game back on. ■

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BY
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Code Red When baseball players like Bud Norris talk about respecting the game, they are sending an alarming message about whom the sport doesn't belong to.



adres pitcher Bud Norris is owed a debt of gratitude for his response to a *USA Today* survey indicating that 87 percent of the benches-clearing altercations in MLB occur between different ethnic groups.

"This is America's game. This is America's pastime, and over the last 10 to 15 years we've seen a very big world influence in this game," Norris said. "We're opening this game to everyone that can play. However, if you're going to come into our country and make our American dollars, you need to respect a game that has been here for over 100 years."

Each line likely made his employers, the players' union and baseball historians sink in embarrassment. Later that day, Norris sought predictable safe ground by blaming the writer ("My words were definitely misconstrued, but that's besides the point") and then by apologizing to all of the people he may have hurt. American Public Life 101.

Norris, a white American from the San Francisco Bay Area, looked bad. He suggested baseball players not born in the United States are outsiders, guests to the American game who should be grateful they were asked to participate, instead of equal partners in a game that belongs to everyone. Naturally, he wasn't talking about the Canadians, like Russell Martin, or the Japanese, like Ichiro Suzuki, as the outsiders. He was talking about Latinos in general—the ones treated as usurpers in a country tense about immigration, even though baseball cultivated Latino players because they were the cheapest talent source since the Negro Leagues—and about Astros outfielder Carlos Gomez in particular. In speaking in code, Norris unintentionally provided a rare decoding, offering an opportunity to examine the lens through which people see one another.

Nationals 34-year-old closer Jonathan Papelbon saw Bryce Harper through a generational lens and fought him in the dugout after the 22-year-old failed to run out a pop-up. Norris saw Gomez, a world-class agitator, through the lens of showboating. With both Papelbon and Norris, the key code word was "respect." For decades, players have taken it upon themselves to determine who is "respecting the game." It is the oddest of traditions: Because baseball is almost the only sport in which the defense has the ball, the opposition (namely the pitcher, through the threat of putting one in a hitter's ribs) decides the extent and style of celebration of the other team's players. Imagine Clay Matthews policing Rob Gronkowski's first-down celebration.

The problem is, policing can carry enormous undertones of race, class and tradition—and of selective justice. Maybe Gomez deserves to get knocked on his can, but "respecting the game" is often code for the "white way." Norris essentially told the world that the clubhouse, 60 years after Roberto Clemente, has not yet decided to accept a certain Latino flourish, the same way more flamboyant black players or younger, brasher white players often once wound up in the dirt. It explains why the ethnic lines usually cross when tempers flare. It explains why Norris conveniently forgot that Babe Ruth invented showboating, and conveniently ignores the way that Blue Jays third baseman Josh Donaldson admires his home runs, thumps his chest, demands respect and is lauded for his swagger.

Norris also underscored precisely baseball's larger problem of wanting everything both ways; it is a game that craves being modern but is unsure which of its traditions to discard. The AL and NL play each other under different rules daily. The game celebrates first place while clamoring for more playoff teams, which inherently dilutes the longest regular season in sports, yet is unwilling to shorten the season. The game wants to attract younger fans, but anyone displaying a little style risks getting decked not only by an opposing pitcher as if it were 1934 but also by his own teammate in his own dugout. Unlike in basketball and football, cultures that evolve with their participants, baseball players must adapt to baseball culture. Dick Butkus wouldn't have stood for a touchdown dance. Now quarterbacks celebrate first downs and no one cares.

Inadvertently, Norris opened the door to this conversation, but instead of apologizing, maybe we should learn each other's language and keep talking.

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